

Surrounded "[Version 2.0 by BuddyDk - Oktober 9 2003][Easy read, easy print][Completely new scan][front flap:]The second fast-moving thriller by Brian Coffey featuring Mike Tucker, art dealer, heir to a vast unobtainable fortune and highly successful professional thief. He is persuaded to lead Meyers and Bates in the robbery of an exclusive California shopping mall containing a bank crammed with cash, an expensive jewellers and eighteen other shops catering for super-extravagant tastes. The job is expected to take little more than an hour and is seemingly a walkover. But something is bugging Tucker: something Meyers has not told him. The operation has hardly begun when an alarm is sounded - too soon. They are surrounded. There is no way out. Yet when the police finally break in the three men have vanished with the loot into thin air.Jacket illustration by William RankinPrice(in UK only)£2-50 net

Surrounded Brian Coffey Arthur Barker Limited London A subsidiary of Weidenfeld
(Publishers) Limited

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The slim, tousle-haired man entered the lobby of the Americana Hotel, leaving the cacophony of the Seventh Avenue traffic behind him. Well dressed and quietly handsome, obviously sure of himself and in control of his world, he had a trace of aristocracy in his fine-boned face. And a vague but unmistakable touch of fear lay in his dark eyes. It was one thing for the son of a respectable family to carve out a successful career as a criminal entrepreneur, but quite another for him to come to accept this unconventional way of life on a visceral level. He knew he was a good thief, a master planner, but he always expected to get caught. He was not yet working on the new job, was not currently engaged in anything illegal, but already he was wary and on edge. Pushing through a mob of conventioners and their wives, he crossed to the seedily elegant marble staircase that led down to the hotel restaurants. At the bottom of the steps he glanced at the ranks of public telephones but decided against using any of them. He passed the entrance to the Columbian Coffee Shop, turned the corner, and walked the length of the long corridor to the second set of telephones at the back of the hotel. These were used far less than those phones positioned more conveniently at the base of the main staircase. Here he was alone. The dead-end hall was quiet, an unexpected pocket of serenity in the center of the city. Here he would not be overheard. And privacy was essential, more for his own peace of mind than for any real danger that the pending conversation would reveal his criminality. He deposited a dime and dialed the operator. She waited through eighteen rings before she deigned to answer, and then she placed his call to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, as if she were doing him a favor instead of performing a service. "Felton's Bookshop," the Harrisburg connection said. It was an old man's voice: cracked, dry, weary. "Clitus?" "Yes?" "This is Mike Tucker," the dark-eyed man said. He leaned in toward the phone, sheltered between the Plexiglas sound-proofing wings on both sides. Felton hesitated. When he did speak, he unconsciously lowered his voice. "Look, I'm busy right now, Mike. The place is full of customers. Maybe . . . Can I call you back in five minutes?" "Of course," Tucker said. The call back was part of the routine they went through every time it was necessary for them to communicate. "I'll give you the number I'm calling from. You have something to write with?" "Wait . . . Yeah, here's a pencil. Go ahead, Mike." After Tucker gave him the number, the old man read it back. Neither of them had mentioned the area code, an omission that would have made the number meaningless to anyone who might be listening in on the line. "I don't want to wait here too long," Tucker said. "I'll get back to you in five minutes. Promise." The dark-eyed man hung up. All the papers that he carried—driver's license, credit cards, museum membership—identified him as Michael Tucker, although Tucker was not his real last name. His legal surname was well known to readers of the Times society and financial pages because his father's wealth commanded both respect and envy. However, he felt more comfortable with his alias because the Tucker identity had not been contaminated by his father. He did not merely hate the old man, he loathed him. When he was masquerading as Michael Tucker, he felt fresh and clean; and he could almost convince himself that there was no blood tie between him and his father. The Tucker identity was a release from unpleasant associations and certain burdensome responsibilities. Besides, when you broke the law to earn your living, you were wise to use a name that could not be traced back to you. The hotel corridor remained quiet. Far down at the other end, past the public restrooms and the entrance to the bar that would open later in the day, dishes rattled in the coffee shop. Someone laughed, voices rose in good humor, but no one turned the corner and came Tucker's way. Finally the telephone rang. "Clitus?" "Hello, Mike. How are things with you?" He had left the bookshop for a public phone. Traffic noises filled the air behind him. "Not bad," Tucker said. "How's Dotty?" "Couldn't be better," Felton said. "She's taking belly-dancing lessons." Tucker laughed. "What is she—sixty-four?" "Sixty-three," Felton said. "I told her she'd be making a fool of herself. But you know something? When she comes home from the lessons and shows me what she's learned, she gets me so excited I'm like a honeymooning bridegroom again." His

own chuckle complemented Tucker's laugh. "But this isn't what you called about. You got my letter?" "An hour ago," Tucker said. The letter had been in the morning's mail at Tucker's midtown Manhattan post-office box: a white envelope with no return address. He knew it was from Clitus before he opened it because he received letters exactly like it once every month or so. Half that often, it was something worth following up. Clitus Felton earned his way as liaison between criminal free-lancers on the East Coast. Once he had been in the business himself, pulling off two or three big robberies a year. But he was old now, sixty-eight, nearly forty years older than Tucker. And he had retired because Dotty was afraid that his luck was running out. However, after six months in the bookstore, he had known he would be unhappy as long as he was permanently estranged from the old life, the old excitement. Therefore, he had contacted friends and offered his middle-man services. He kept names, aliases, and addresses all in his head, and when someone contacted him to find the right partners for a job, Felton considered the possibilities and wrote a few letters and tried to help. In return, he got five per cent of the take if the job went as planned. It was second-hand excitement, but it kept him going. "Your letter mentioned bank work," Tucker said. "You know I don't like bank work." "The letter also mentioned that it was different from your usual bank work," Felton said. "It's very different. Safer, surer, with a bigger-than-average reward." "Where?" "California." "That's a long way from home," Tucker said. "It's always best to work that way," the old man said. "Don't you agree?" "I guess I do." At the far end of the corridor a young couple turned the corner and started down the long hall toward Tucker. The girl was searching the bottom of her purse and passing change over to the young man with her. Clearly they were going to use one of the pay phones. "I can't talk much longer," Tucker said. "Can we get down to basic facts?" "You should get in touch with Frank Meyers," Felton said. "You know him? Ever worked with him before?" "No." "He's right there in your city." "Is this his job?" "Yeah. He lived in California for a while—that's where he got the idea," Felton said. "He's a good man." "We'll see," Tucker said, watching the young couple as they drew nearer. The boy had hair to his shoulders and looked out of place in a well-cut business suit. The girl was dark and pretty. "When can you set up a meeting?" "I'll give you his home address," Felton said. Tucker frowned. "He doesn't mind my knowing it? He's that careless?" "He isn't careless," Felton said. "He—" "I don't like working with a man who can't separate his professional and private lives." "Not everyone's as fanatical about that as you are," the old man said. "Lots of guys have been in the business for years and years, not separating anything, and they haven't taken any falls. I can name dozens." "Sooner or later they'll get bitten," Tucker said. "Then you aren't interested in this?" Felton asked. "I'm interested," Tucker said. He had to be interested because he needed the money. He took a note pad and pen from his jacket pocket and copied down Frank Meyers' address. "I'm sure you'll like the setup once Frank explains it to you," Felton said. "If you don't . . . Tell Frank to let me know if you aren't interested. I know I can find someone else for him." "I'll do that," Tucker said. "It really is a sweet job, Mike." "I hope so. I need it right now. Otherwise, I wouldn't even give this one a second thought." "He's good. I guarantee it." "Give Dotty my love," Tucker said as the young couple stopped at the telephone next to his. "Good luck, Mike." "Sure," Tucker said, hooking the receiver in its cradle. He smiled at the girl, nodded at the boy, and walked back toward the main stairs.

The apartment house on Seventy-ninth Street was not yet unfit enough to be slated for demolition, but it was getting there. The front steps were badly cracked and hosed up, the concrete eroding away as if it were not much sturdier than loose sand. Scarred, badly weathered, the outer foyer door was centered with a sheet of heavy, cracked, grime-smeared glass. The foyer itself, dirty and dimly lighted, boasted a rather complex mosaic floor, but more than a hundred of the tiny tiles were missing. Tucker checked the mailboxes against the address that Clitus Felton had given him: Meyers, 3C. He did not have to ring Meyers to get inside the building because the security lock on the inner door was broken. Anyone could walk in and out as he pleased. Tucker went in and climbed the steps to the third floor. The man who answered the door of 3C looked more like cheap muscle than an idea man. He was about six feet, weighed maybe two-twenty, giving him three inches and sixty pounds on Tucker. His face was square and hard, framed by short yellow hair and enlivened by a pair of intensely blue eyes. "Meyers?" Tucker asked. "Yeah?" His voice was low and rough. Tucker knew the sound of it and what it meant. Someone had once stomped on the big man's throat, giving him an Andy Devine imitation for a voice. His neck was not inflamed or swollen, which meant it had happened a long time ago. "I'm Tucker." Meyers blinked, surprised. He wiped one hand across his face, trying to pull off his confusion as if it were a mask. His bright blue eyes seemed slightly unfocused. "But . . . You just called a couple of minutes ago." "I used the telephone booth on the corner." "Oh." Standing there in the shabby hallway where he might be seen by anyone entering or leaving another apartment, Tucker was getting impatient with Meyers. "Do I have to say a secret password or something?" "What?" Meyers asked. "To get in. I need a secret word?" "Oh, no. Sorry," the big man said, stepping back out of the way. "Didn't expect you so soon, that's all. You caught me off guard." Tucker was uncomfortably certain that it did not take much to catch Frank Meyers off guard. How in the hell had a sound head like Clitus Felton become involved with an ox like this? He entered the apartment, sidled past Meyers, and went on through the dingy little reception area. The living room measured ten by twenty feet and had four large windows, yet it seemed like a closet. The walls had once been clean and white but had since yellowed and now were gradually turning brown at the edges as if subjected to a great and relentless heat. Like lumps of charred matter, the furniture was all dark and heavy and ugly. Everything was overstuffed, shape-less. And there was too much of it: a pair of squat gray sofas, three unmatched easy chairs, a low-slung coffee table, end tables, pole lamps, table lamps, a desk, a hutch, a television set . . . Tucker thought the place must have come furnished and that Meyers had added considerable belongings of his own to what the landlord provided. "Sit down, sit down!" the big man said, motioning to the easy chairs. Tucker sat on one of the sofas. "Can I get you something to drink?" "No, thanks," Tucker said. "A beer? I've got Scotch, vodka, rum . . . How about a rum and Coke?" He rubbed his hands together incessantly. They were calloused and made a soft hissing noise. He could see that Meyers was nervous—rather, curiously agitated. Though he did not want a drink at eleven-thirty in the morning, he was willing to take one if it would help to relax the other man. "Vodka and ice. But a small one." "Sure," Meyers said. "Back in a second." He went out to the kitchen, where he started rattling bottles and glasses. Tucker studied the room more closely than he had been able to do when Meyers was there. He saw that the place was not only overcrowded with furniture but cluttered as well with dirty whiskey glasses, week-old newspapers, empty and crumpled cigarette packages . . . The worn maroon carpet had not been swept for weeks, perhaps not for months. The end tables, television, and coffee tables were sheathed in jackets of gray dust. Could Frank Meyers possibly be an idea man, a group leader? The concept was ludicrous as far as Tucker was concerned. How could Meyers conceive, plan, and execute an intricate crime when he could not even manage to keep his own living room clean? What was wrong with Clitus Felton? Why would he work with a man like this? Or was it possible that the old man had known Meyers years ago when he was something

better than he seemed to be now? Meyers, returned from the kitchen and gave Tucker his drink. He took his own whiskey over to one of the easy chairs and, holding the small glass in both hands, sat down. For the first time Tucker saw that the man reflected his sloppily kept apartment. His trousers were unpressed, his white shirt a rumpled mess. He had not shaved in a couple of days, and his yellow whiskers were beginning to cast soft shadows over his face. "You aren't what I expected," Meyers said. "Oh?" "I thought you'd be older." "I'm twenty-nine," Tucker said. "That's awfully young." Meyers sipped his whiskey and watched Tucker over the rim of the glass. His eyes were wide and slightly bloodshot. "You?" Tucker asked. "Forty-one." "You aren't that far ahead of me." "How long you been in the business?" "About three and a half years," Tucker said. "Pulled my first job more than twenty years ago." He sounded faintly nostalgic, like a high school jock recalling his biggest game, as if he longed to relive those early years. That was a bad sign. When a man began to yearn for the past, he was not doing very well in the present. And when a thief longed for the past, it also meant that he expected to get nailed by the cops in the near future. It meant he was losing faith in himself and that he could not be fully trusted. Tucker knew he should stand up and get out of there. He could see that Meyers was trouble. But he did need the money . . . His share from the hijacking of a Mafia cash collection, split only three months ago, had run out even though it had been a substantial sum. He lived extremely well, and he wanted to keep living extremely well, wanted to keep the Park Avenue apartment, the art work, all of it . . . He had been offered two other jobs recently, but he had turned them both down when they failed to meet one or the other of the three criteria he had set for a robbery. First of all he never robbed individuals, but hit institutions like insurance companies, banks, department stores—and the Mafia, once. Second, he would work only when he was the undisputed boss, when the plans for the operation were marked with his personal and careful attention to detail. Finally, the job had to feel good to him, had to appeal to some internal gauge that, as indescribable and indefinable as it was, had never yet failed him. He rejected a great many deals that ultimately worked out for other people. He passed up potentially rewarding opportunities. However, his caution and his three criteria had thus far kept him out of jail. "Something else about you," Meyers said, still looking at him over the whiskey glass. Tucker waited. "You don't look like what you are." Tucker still said nothing. "What do I look like?" Meyers asked. Then he answered his own question: "Muscle. I look like a cheap hood. That's how I got started, and I'll never shake the image." He finished his drink and put the glass on the water-ringed coffee table. "Everyone I ever worked with . . . You could tell they were in the business. It was stamped on them. But you look like some hot-shot young executive." "Thanks," Tucker said. "No offense meant." "Or taken." "I just meant that you don't look like a hood. And that's just great. That's a plus in this business." "I'm not a hood," Tucker said. "I'm a thief." "Same thing," Meyers said, though it was not the same thing at all to Tucker. "As clean cut as you look, you'd make a good front man in an operation." Tucker had been holding his vodka, but he had not drunk much of it. The day was too new to support liquor. Besides, after studying Frank Meyers and the man's apartment, Tucker wondered how well the glass had been washed. He finally put it down. "Speaking of operations, what about this one of yours?" "I still don't know much about you," the big man said, shifting uncomfortably in the easy chair. "What do you need to know?" "Clitus recommended you. I guess that ought to be enough . . . But what are some things you've done? Who have you worked with?" Reluctantly, Tucker leaned back in the stale-smelling couch. He did not want to stay here any longer than he had to, for the disorder and filth put him on edge. However, Meyers was beginning, just beginning, to sound like a careful man. Perhaps he was more and better than he appeared to be. There might be a safe profit in the job after all. "You ever hear about the armored car hit in Boston two years ago? Allied Transport truck was knocked over for six hundred thousand. Four men did the job." "I heard of it. That was yours?" Meyers leaned forward,

shoulders hunched, interested. Tucker explained how it had been done, whom he had worked with. He did not try to make it sound better than it was. He did not need to gloss it over, for it had been a perfect caper, cleverly planned from the start. There was no way, in the telling, to improve upon it. "Now you," Tucker said when he finished talking about himself. Whether he had planned them or not, Frank Meyers had been in on some good bits of business over the years. And he had worked with many of the right people. He did not appear to be a sound, seasoned, successful operator, but apparently he was. In his retellings he was as straightforward and brief as Tucker had been. His record was not as flashy as the younger man's, but it was solid and impressive in its own way. "Anything else you want to know about me?" Meyers asked. "Yes. What's the job you've got now?" "You don't like the preliminaries, do you?" Meyers asked, smiling. "No." The big man drained the water from the melted ice cubes in his whiskey glass, shoved to his feet. "Come on out to the kitchen. It'll be easier to go over the plans." The kitchen was small and certainly as poorly kept as the living room had been. Dirty dishes filled the sink. The waste-basket was overflowing with used paper towels, empty car-tons, and open cans that were crusted around the edges with the food that they had once contained. The cracked lino-leum was stained in dozens of spots and was filmed overall with the grime of day-to-day city life. A cockroach was feasting on bread crumbs by the refrigerator. It sensed their footsteps and scuttled for cover under the oven. "We'll use the table here," Meyers said. He removed a dirty plate and a set of silverware left over from breakfast— or perhaps from the previous night's supper. He ran his big hands over the top of the dinette, satisfied himself that there was nothing sticky or wet to get in their way. "Clitus told me it was a bank job," Tucker said. He stood at one end of the table, preferring not to sit down. "That's right," Meyers rasped. "And a sweet one." "I don't like bank work," Tucker said. "There are too damned many risks. You've got to deal with fancy alarm systems, closed-circuit television, heroic tellers, panicky patrons, guards, limited getaway routes . . ." "This is different," Meyers said, echoing Clitus Felton. He went to the bread box that sat on the counter by the sink and removed a large, folded paper from beneath a tin of store-bought sweet rolls. "When you see the setup, you'll love it." When he saw the setup, Tucker thought, he would more than likely laugh in Frank Meyers's face and then get the hell out of there. But there was nothing to be gained by leaving before Meyers said his piece. The big man might just have something after all. That distracted look had finally left his blue eyes. He seemed to be more alert, less pumped up with nervous energy, and more inclined to get down to the facts. He was still rumpled and somewhat sour smelling, but he no longer looked as if he belonged in this pigsty of an apartment. Obviously the thought of this bank job energized and lifted him. Which might mean something. Or nothing. Meyers unfolded the paper on top of the kitchen table and stepped back to give Tucker a good look at it. It was a carefully rendered diagram of a large building. The paper itself was a four-foot square, and the scale was twenty-five feet to the inch. It was well drawn, full of names and shorthand descriptions. "The bank?" Tucker asked, impressed by the detail. He bent closer, squinting at the writing. "No," Meyers said. "It's the full layout of a small shopping center near Santa Monica. Nineteen stores, all under one roof." "Nineteen stores," Tucker said, not believing it. "Nine-teen stores—and one bank." "That's right." "You want to hit a bank that's situated in the center of a goddamned enclosed shopping mall," Tucker said, incredulous. "Is that it?" He half turned away from the diagram and stared hard at Meyers. The big man had to be joking. He was serious. His broad face was creased by a silly but sincere grin. "I want that bank. That's mainly what we're after, naturally. But I also want two or three of the very best stores in the place." Tucker just stared at him. "Stores," Meyers repeated. "Jewelry, furs, antiques . . ." "I understood you the first time." "Do the logistics bother you?" Meyers asked. "They don't bother you?" "No." "They should." "If you'll look more closely at the drawing," Meyers said, "you'll see that there are only four entrances to the mall." He held up four thick

fingers, as if he thought Tucker might need some learning reinforcement. "We can gain control of all the doors and then clean out everything worth taking." He laughed at Tucker's expression. "Sounds crazy, doesn't it?" "Absolutely," Tucker said. He turned completely away from the table. "And you can count me out." Meyers stopped grinning. "Wait a minute." He laid one heavy hand on Tucker's shoulder. "It really is possible. It's safe. It's the sweetest thing I've ever come across." Tucker grimaced, shrugged. Meyers took the hint. He moved his hand. "Look," Tucker said, "even if you had control of the four mall doors, what would you do with all of the customers? That place will be full of them any day of the week. Shop-pers coming and going, in and out . . ." "I'm aware of that." "Glad to hear it." Meyers's hoarse voice was touched by anxiety. "Believe me, I've got it all figured out. I'm no amateur. Those people won't bother us." Tucker ignored him, because he was pretty much convinced that whatever Meyers had "figured out" would be full of holes. "And what are you going to do about the tele-phones?" "Telephones?" "There, must be a hundred or more public and private phones in a shopping mall that size. Are you going to be able to put them all out of use before anyone in there can call the cops?" "We won't have to worry about the telephones," Meyers said. He was grinning again, though only tentatively. He resembled a big clumsy hound that wanted approval, affection, congratulations. But there was a decidedly human desperation in his eyes. "Furthermore," Tucker continued, "you'd need an army to hold the mall, once you'd taken it." "Just four or five men," Meyers said hastily. "Is that right?" Tucker turned, started for the kitchen door. "Wait a minute," Meyers said. "I'm not stupid. I know what the hell I'm doing." His anger was feigned. It was only meant to arrest Tucker, to make him listen for another moment. In the middle of the cluttered living room he caught Tucker by the arm and stopped him. "We wouldn't hit the damned place during shopping hours. I never said that." Tucker sighed, pulled loose of the big man's hand. He worked his shoulders to straighten his coat. "It's still no good. This would be twice as difficult as any normal after-hours bank job. You'd have two sets of alarms to deal with—the mall's and the bank's systems." Meyers shook his burly head. His close-cropped hair glinted like metal bristles. "No alarms." "A bank without alarms?" "Come back to the kitchen with me," Meyers said. He was almost pleading now. His desperation, whatever the source of it, was growing sharper by the minute. "Look at the diagram and listen to me. Hear me out. I won't keep you long. But . . . Right now you don't have any idea what's up my sleeve." "And I don't think I want to know," Tucker said. "Felton deals with me!" Meyers said. His whispery voice now contained a note of pride, a curious dignity that was at odds with his slovenly appearance. "I'm not a loser. I've been in this business all my life. I've been successful at it, too." Tucker looked around at the dirty walls, the unswept carpet, the tattered furniture. "If you've been so terribly successful what are you doing in a place like this?" Following the younger man's gaze, Meyers seemed to see the apartment for the first time. He coughed, wiped his face with both hands, a man trying to slough off the insubstantial but disconcerting residue of a nightmare. "I have one weakness." "Is that right?" "Women." "That's no weakness." "It is with me." Meyers's right hand went to his throat. His blunt fingers traced a series of vague, pale scars that Tucker now saw for the first time. Someone had stomped on his throat, or had opened it with a quick knife. Right now Meyers looked as if he could still feel the flesh parting under the blade. "I get ahead, pull a few good jobs, build up a cushion, figure I don't have any worries . . . Then I hook up with a woman. And she takes it all away from me. You know how it is. Women are parasites." "Maybe yours are," Tucker said. "Mine isn't." "Then you're damned lucky," Meyers said. "Mine are always parasites." But there was a false note in his voice, a lack of conviction. He did not sound like a woman hater—or like a man who would let anyone, man or woman, take money away from him. "Look, we aren't here to talk about women. Come back to the kitchen. Give me ten minutes to explain everything. I know you'll want in on this as soon as you understand what it is." "I already know what it is," Tucker said sourly. "It's a bank job with especially high risks.

I'm not that desperate for money." "Sure you are," Meyers said. He chuckled. "If you weren't desperate, you'd be long gone by now. You're small, but you wouldn't let me stop you so easily unless you wanted to be stopped. You'd flip me on my ass and walk out that door. No . . . You want to hear the whole scheme, but right now you're playing little games so that you can learn more about me." Tucker smiled. Meyers was entirely correct, and it was to his credit that he had perceived the situation so clearly. Maybe he was a better man than he appeared to be. "Ten minutes?" "Okay," Tucker agreed. "Let's go out to the kitchen and look at the diagram again." The big man led the way. Fifteen minutes later Meyers thumped the top of the kitchen table with one clenched fist. "That's the whole plan, every last detail. Smooth as silk. What do you think?" "It's extremely clever," Tucker admitted, still studying the whiteprint of Oceanview Plaza, the shopping mall. "But there are a few problems." The anxiety returned to Meyers's voice. "Problems?" "You don't seem to have given any thought to weapons," Tucker said. "Have you?" "We don't need anything fancy." Meyers rubbed his hands together as if he were soaping them under a hot-water spigot. "Each man can supply his own piece." "I disagree," Tucker said. "In the first stages of this job you're going to have two professional guards, probably ex-cops, and you're going to have to subdue them quickly. One of them is bound to be a hero type. But he's less likely to become a real threat if he's faced with a gun that intimidates him. The bigger and uglier the guns, the less trouble you'll have with the people on the other end of them. It's just good psychology." Meyers continued to lather his hands with invisible soap. "We can't conceal machine guns under our coats." "They don't have to be machine guns." "What else?" "Let me worry about that. I have a good contact. He'll find something suitable." Meyers licked his heavy lips. "I didn't expect to have to finance this operation." "I'll put up for the guns," Tucker said. "Then you're in?" Tucker looked at the diagram for a long while, admired the work Meyers had put into it. Then he let his eyes move around the kitchen, from the filthy dishes in the sink to the pair of cockroaches that had come out in the far corner in bold defiance of the human presence. "I'm in—but only if this is my job." "It's your job," Meyers said. "I don't know if you fully understand me." Tucker began to fold up the diagram of the shopping mall. "I make all the decisions, right down the line." Meyers nodded rapidly. He walked quickly to the sink, turned on his heel, leaned against the drainboard, then came away almost at once, paced nervously back to the table as Tucker finished folding the whiteprint. He started lathering his hands again. "Clitus explained how you work. You always have to be in charge of the operation. I accept that." "Just so we're straight with each other from the start." "I don't mind," Meyers said. "You've got a good reputation, so I trust you. The only thing that really matters is getting a team together, getting the job done." He was growing increasingly agitated, as on edge as he had been when Tucker had first come into the apartment. He wanted badly to get on with the job, wanted to set it up and knock it off as fast as possible. Apparently he needed money even worse than Tucker did. However, he looked as if he required it for something more essential than food, a new apartment, and a new woman. "What kind of split would you want?" "A third," Tucker said. Meyers winced, turned away, wheeled back again, rubbing his hands together incessantly. "Hey, that's steep." "It's the same thing that you'll be getting." Tucker gave him the folded diagram, chiefly to keep him from lathering his hands. "We'll need only one more man for this, and we'll divide the take three ways, even shares for everybody." "One more man?" "Someone to break the safe, two safes if necessary," Tucker said. "But we can't pull this off with less than four or five men," Meyers insisted. Tucker smiled. "Just watch us."

Imrie's place did not look like an illicit gun shop. It was a three-story brick building on a quiet lower-middle-class street in Queens. Weathered and somewhat soiled, it was also solid and dignified, a respectable neo-Colonial structure from the turn of the century. It shared the block with a neighborhood grocery, a pharmacy, a dry cleaner's, and many narrow well-kept apartment buildings. To add to the image of serenity there were even a few large battered elms shadowing pieces of the street and sidewalks. On the glass door to Imrie's first-floor showroom, gilt lettering read: antiques and used furniture. The antique dealership was mostly a front for the more lucrative gun business. Tucker pulled open the heavy door and went inside. A loud buzzer, like the shrill call of a jungle bird, sounded at the rear of the store, softened a bit by the intervening forest of old cane-back chairs, tables, table lamps, sideboards, gramophones, dry sinks, and teetering stacks of other valuable and worthless paraphernalia that Imrie had accumulated. Sudden shadows, dark corners, dust, and bare lightbulbs contributed to the decor. Imrie was sitting in an ancient maroon brocade chair in one of the few patches of light, just inside the door. "Sorry I took so long," Tucker said. "I had trouble catching a cab, and then the traffic was terrible." "It's always terrible," Imrie said, struggling to his feet with a deep groan of real physical distress. He was only five feet six, but he weighed more than two hundred pounds. His physique, his baby-smooth but sly and knowing face, and the crinkly fringe of gray hair that ringed his bald head all made him look like a philandering, vow-breaking medieval friar. He put down a pornographic novel that he had been reading and hitched up his baggy trousers, which tended to settle too far down over his gut. He had been eating cookies, and now he had crumbs on his shirt. Sighing with distaste at his own slovenliness, he brushed away the tiny bits. "Be with you in a minute, Tucker." He locked the door and put up the closed sign. "How you been?" Tucker asked. "Not too good." Imrie drew the blind down behind the front door. "I've got stomach problems." He turned around and slapped his ample belly. "It's this business. Anybody'd get ulcers from it. Too damned many worries." He put his hands on his stomach as if to reassure himself that it was still there. "There was a time not very long ago," he said wistfully, "when a man in my line could go about his work unhampered, when he could be certain of his place in things." This was Imrie's favorite topic for conversation, or rather for monologue. "These days, you have to worry about the anti-gun nuts, the bleeding-heart liberals, the peace fanatics, these mixed-up pacifist kids . . . They make me feel like a criminal, for Christ's sake." "If you wanted to do business with Imrie, you were obliged to spend some time listening to his complaints. Trying to sound sympathetic, Tucker said, "I can see where it would ruin your digestion." "To say the least." Imrie rubbed his stomach, consoling it. "Thank God the majority of decent Americans understand that we have to have guns to keep this country free. If we didn't have guns, how would we keep the Communists out?" He burped on his cookies, excused himself. "Most people realize that there's nothing foul and fiendish about a man who deals in guns. Look, I'm no degenerate. Most people know that a gun dealer is no more a villain than your local Ford salesman or the friendly neighborhood Good Humor man." He burped again, patted his lips. "Now, Tucker, what can I do for you?" "I want three guns. Something ugly enough to terrorize the average citizen. Something that would intimidate a man and keep him from behaving foolishly." "Sure," Imrie said, smiling. "I know just what you mean. I can fix you up." "I thought you could," Tucker said. They walked to the rear of the store along a tight aisle of cupboards, corner desks, bookcases, china closets, and other furniture, all stacked on top of one another, all graced with nearly perfectly preserved isinglass doors. At the back of the room, they went through a tattered yellow curtain, up dimly lighted stairs past the second floor where Imrie lived, and on up to the third level where the fat man kept his guns. "I couldn't deliver these today, if that's what you have in mind," Imrie said as they came off the stairs. "They need work done on them." "I don't need them today," Tucker said. On the third floor, as on the first, the partitions had been knocked out

to form one enormous room. But while the first floor contained old furniture, curiosities and antiques, this place housed more deadly merchandise: in excess of two thousand rifles, shotguns, handguns, machine and submachine guns. They were hooked on the white pegboard walls, crammed on wooden and metal wall shelves, tilted against wooden display lifts, laid gently in velvet-lined collector's cases, scattered about the floor, jammed into paper bags. The room also contained metal-working machines, lathes and a small gas-fired forge and cooking pots where metals could be melted down and shaped. Despite the disarray there was no dust up here as there was on the first floor. And all the corners were well lighted. There was an open, airy feeling that the lower level did not have. Quite obviously, it was here at the top of the building where Imrie's heart would remain even if the improbable should come to pass and his antique business should become more profitable than gun dealing. "I take it you don't want machine guns," Imrie said. "If you did, you'd have said." "Something ugly and impressive—but concealed," Tucker said, measuring an imaginary weapon with his slim hands. "Three of them?" "That would be best." The fat man scratched his shiny skull, ruffled the fringe of gray hair, pursed and unpursed his lips, smiled with sudden inspiration. "Give me a minute or two." He went off to prowl through his haphazardly stored collection. Five minutes later he called Tucker over to the main workbench. "Here's what I can let you have," he said, carefully aligning three guns on the top of the bench. They were fairly well matched heavy black automatic pistols with folding wire stocks that could be swung back to transform them into moderately efficient submachine guns. At the moment, all the stocks were clamped forward over the barrels; however, the pistols looked nonetheless deadly in this compacted shape. "These are perfect," Tucker said, lifting one of the guns, testing its weight on his flat palm. "I've never seen anything like this before." "It's a Czech Skorpion," Imrie said fondly. "World War Two?" "Sure." "Looks like a thirty-eight," Tucker said. "No. Just a thirty-two." Imrie picked up one of the others. "But it isn't a lady's weapon, believe you me. It packs more wallop than any other thirty-two-caliber piece ever made." As gently as if he were handling a mean-tempered poisonous snake, Tucker turned the pistol over in his hands, examining it from every angle. Heavy, well defined, cast with many rich planes, the piece looked especially wicked and even alien, almost like something from the lurid cover of an old science-fiction magazine. Though inanimate, it radiated a chilling animal malevolence, a tangible and exciting evil. Because he was basically a non-violent man who operated in a violent business, Tucker was able to assess the weapon from the viewpoints of both the professional and the victim. From either perspective the Skorpion passed muster. "Nice work," Imrie said. "Yes." "They were proud of their product." Tucker held up the pistol, sighted along the barrel through the framework of the collapsed wire stock. "It's ugly enough. But how accurate is it?" "When it's a pistol, it's about as accurate as anything you've ever carried. At least it will be when I get finished with it." "And as a submachine gun?" "Only half as good. But a submachine gun doesn't need to be as precise as a pistol, right?" "Right." "And if you use it, you'll probably only want it as a pistol," Imrie said. "How much work do they need?" Imrie looked at the three pistols, at the tools on his work-bench, sucked on a tooth while he thought about it. "Oh . . . I suppose I could have them ready for you around noon on Monday. How would that be?" "Fine," Tucker said. "Ammunition?" "I already have that," Imrie said. "It's all my own stuff, hand packed and guaranteed." Tucker put down the Skorpion he had been examining. "How much do you want for them?" "Remember," Imrie said, "I've got a lot of work to do to get them in shape. And I—" "How much?" "Don't forget, none of these pieces has a history, Tucker. They're all as clean as a baby's ass. You get nailed on this job, you won't have to worry that maybe you're carrying a gun that was used in a big heist or a murder or something." Tucker smiled. "How much, Imrie?" Imrie told him. "Too much." They haggled for several minutes, exchanged tales of poverty and want, finally settled on a thousand dollars for the pistols and ammunition. "When you come back on Monday," Imrie said, "we'll go down to the basement and use one of the

Skorpions on the shooting range."Tucker frowned. "Doesn't it handle about like any ordinary automatic?" "Pretty much," Imrie said. "But it never hurts to know a gun, what it can and can't do for you." "Even when you don't expect to use it?" "Especially then," Imrie said. Thinking about Oceanview Plaza, about the curiously agitated movements of Frank Meyers, Tucker nodded. "I guess you're right."

At three-thirty that afternoon, on the bottom floor of the Americana Hotel once again, Tucker pumped coins into the pay phone until the operator was satisfied. On the far end of the line another telephone rang, and Clitus Felton answered it. "It's Mike," Tucker said. "You busy?" "Pretty busy, yeah," Felton said. Tucker gave him the number of the phone he was using and hung up. The hotel corridor remained deserted. Dishes clanked, silverware clattered, and voices rose in a sealike susurrations from the coffee shop around the corner. The floor had recently been mopped down, for the hall smelled of pine and detergent; but the maintenance crew was nowhere in sight. Each of the next five minutes felt like an hour, partly because Tucker was worried about getting unwanted company and being overheard on the line with Clitus—and partly because he was beginning to wonder if he had made a serious mistake by involving himself in this operation. The whole thing was a hair too daring, a shade too clever and complex. And he kept thinking of Frank Meyers: the way the big man lived, the way he dressed, the desperation in those bright blue eyes . . . He took a roll of Life Savers from his jacket pocket, peeled away the foil from the top, popped a lime-flavored circlet into his mouth. Finally the telephone rang. "Clitus?" "You're throwing in with Frank Meyers, aren't you?" Felton asked, a playful note in his voice. "That's right." "I knew you would," the old man said. "He's a damned good man, a real pro." Tucker tongued the candy wafer to the side of his mouth. "Maybe he once was." "Oh?" Felton said guardedly. "What's wrong with him?" "For one thing, he's living in a dive. He doesn't clean up after himself anymore—nearly has the roaches tamed. He's sloppy, tired, and nervous. He's a man on the edge." "Why?" "He says he let a woman take all his money away from him, and now he's broke." Felton sighed, a hollow ahhh that echoed down the line like the call of a spirit. "It's happened to better men." "But I don't believe that's what's wrong with him," Tucker said, swallowing lime saliva. "I want you to ask around over the weekend. Contact anyone who's worked with him recently. See if you can turn up anything." "Like what?" "I don't know," Tucker said, wishing that he did. "Any-thing that might help explain why he's let himself slide." Felton cleared his throat. "Well . . . I'll try, Mike. But it's probably just a waste of time. If there was anything I should know about Frank, I'd already know it." The old man respected Tucker, knew him to be one of the best in the business. At the same time, he thought he knew Frank Meyers; if not Tucker's equal, he was at least a sensible and reliable man. "One other thing," Tucker said, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, switching the receiver from left to right hand. "I'm going to need someone who's good with safes. I'd like to have Edgar Bates. He's here in the city somewhere, isn't he?" "Sure," Felton said. "Get hold of him for me. Set up a meeting between us for tomorrow at the Museum of Natural History." "What time?" "Let's say—noon. In the room where they have all of those Eskimo totem poles." "If I can't get hold of him?" Felton asked. "I'll know it when he doesn't show up tomorrow," Tucker said. "I'll call you again on Monday to see what you've picked up on Meyers. Good-by, Clitus." He hung up. He crushed the thinning Life Saver between his teeth and swallowed the tiny sugared fragments. The scent of sweetened limes rose in the back of his nostrils. In front of the Americana he caught a taxi and was just as surly with the driver as the driver was with him. The ten-minute ride home required twenty-five minutes in the slug-gish traffic—which gave him too much time to worry about Frank Meyers. He went through three more Life Savers. At his apartment building on Park Avenue in the eighties, he was greeted by a minimally liveried doorman nearly twice his age. "Beautiful day, isn't it, sir?" "Just fine, Harold." "September and October are the only good months in this city," the doorman said. On his black uniform the small brass buttons gleamed with early-October sunlight. Inside, the hall man also wanted to talk about the weather. And the elevator man thought that autumn was his favorite time of the year in New York. Tucker smiled, nodded, and agreed with both of them while he thought about Oceanview Plaza. . . . He entered his nine-room, tenth-floor apartment to the strains of Beethoven's Minuet in G as interpreted by the Philadelphia Orchestra and Eugene Ormandy. The music was

like a cool liquid spilling over him. Some of his concern about Meyers—and the slight but constant fear that was with him when he was in the Tucker persona—disappeared. He felt more at ease, more relaxed than he had all day. However, it was not yet time to mix a drink and sit down with Elise. There were certain details . . . He stepped into the large living-room closet and opened the wall safe, put away the wallet that contained the Tucker papers. He re-moved his own wallet from the safe and slipped that into his jacket pocket, closed the round metal door, and spun the combination dial. Now it was time for a drink and for Elise. She was in the white-on-white kitchen, sitting at the big Lane table, sipping a Jack Rose and reading the newspaper. He put his hands on her shoulders, leaned down, and kissed the side of her slim neck, his lips lingering just long enough to feel the steady pulse of blood in her throat. She shook her head. Her yellow hair bounced. "Just a minute. I'm reading about myself." "You're in the Times?" "Ssshhh," she said, bending more closely over the paper. He took off his jacket, draped it over another chair, then went back into the main hall to the bar, where he fixed himself a vodka martini and admired two of his most expensive possessions. While his hands worked with the bottles and the ice cubes, he studied the two pieces of primitive art that so starkly decorated the cream-colored wall in front of him. There was a fragment of a fifth-century Edo shield, roughly half of a well-worked copper oval trimmed in silver and inlaid with tiny pieces of hand-carved ivory. The African artisan who had made it had lived on the east bank of the Niger River among peace-loving people who made shields and rarely went to war. From the same tribe, but crafted by a different man, was a hunting spear with an intricately carved nine-foot shaft and an ivory-graced iron head. Tucker had paid forty thousand dollars for the fragment of the shield some six months ago. In August he had disposed of a few less important items in his collection and had cleaned out a savings account to come up with the full sixty-five thousand that the spear had cost him. It was the spear that had so severely depleted his resources and had forced him to look for another job. But he did not mind. The great lance was an incredibly beautiful piece of work worth any temporary insolvency. Furthermore, the spear and the shield and the other bits and pieces in the apartment lent substance to his cover as a free-lance dealer in primitive art objects. And that cover was essential. It satisfied Elise, and it stalled his father's hired investigators. He did not profit much from his art dealings, certainly not enough to live in the style he preferred, but that was a fact his father's men could learn only by burglarizing the IRS files. "You can come in here and kiss me now," Elise called from the kitchen. He went back out there and kissed her, lifting her from her chair, bringing her to her feet so that they could embrace. When she finished kissing him, he said, "What's this about your being in the Times?" She slipped out of his arms and tapped the paper, turned it around on the table so he could read it where he stood. "I made the business pages. The article on advertising." Her smile was wide and bright. Bending over the newspaper, palms flat on the table, Tucker read the brief story. It concerned the careers of several of the currently most successful actors and actresses in television commercials, and it gave Elise the highest marks for beauty, charm and professional skill. "With a copy of this in your resume," Tucker said, "you ought to be able to get a lot more money the next time you push a product." She grinned, dimples puckering her smooth cheeks and making her look quite unlike a cool, sophisticated actress. "Your mind's in the same groove as mine—take the suckers for everything you can get out of them." If only you knew, Tucker thought, reminded of what he was planning for Oceanview Plaza. "Nonsense," he said. "You're worth every penny you get, no matter how much it is." The Times reporter was right about her beauty. She was tall and willowy like a show girl, five-eight to Tucker's five-nine. Her legs were exquisite and long, her waist pinched up as if corseted, her breasts high and round and firm. She was a real blonde with wild green eyes, natural and wholesome—and yet sultry. Her complexion was as smooth as an air-brushed bosom in Playboy, an attribute that made it possible

for her to play roles ranging from gosh-wow ingenues to slinky sexpots with equal success. He was continually amazed that she wanted to live with him, for she was the sort of woman who usually was escorted around town by tall handsome men whose shoulders were as wide as doorways. Yet she had come, and she stayed, and they were happy with each other. In all but one way their relationship was fresh and honest. Each came and went as he pleased, with no deceptions, lies or jealousy. They did not make plans for a mutual future because neither wanted the other to feel obligated to any prepared script. They earned and did not own each other. She paid half the rent and utilities, bought half the groceries, because that was the only way she would remain with him. They trusted each other, respected each other as equals. However, when it came to his "business," Tucker deceived her. It was not that he thought she would turn him over to the police if she knew that he was a thief; it was simply that he did not want to involve her in his own criminal activity in any way for which she might later have to suffer. He turned away from the newspaper and put his arms around her again. She was wearing a lightweight knitted suit that clung to her and seemed to dissolve between them. "The New York Times thinks you're beautiful," he said. "Then I must be beautiful." "You're a celebrity." "Impressed?" "Terribly." "Want my autograph?" "On an eight-by-ten glossy." She kissed his chin. "Have you ever been to bed with a celebrity?" "Never." "Now's your chance," she said. "Are you propositioning me?" "That's it exactly." In the master bedroom she undressed him, and then he returned the favor. The buttons on her knit suit parted easily. The flimsy material seemed to melt away from her, flowing down across her full curves and puddling at her feet. His voice was soft, almost inaudible, when he said, "You are beautiful, Elise." "Do you believe everything you read in the papers?" she asked. Later, they went out to the kitchen and made dinner. He put the steaks on and mixed the salad dressing while she cleaned and chopped the lettuce, celery, and carrots. They had lots of cheap wine and finished with Tia Maria and coffee. "I'm whoozy," she said. "So am I." "Defenseless," she said. "Are you really?" "Utterly defenseless." He took her back into the bedroom and helped her slip out of her comfortable quilted houserobe, and then he took advantage of her. It lasted longer this time, was slower but more complete for both of them. Well afterward, she said, "Oh, you got a telephone call from your father's lawyer." He rose up, leaning on one elbow, and looked at her. Her face was half hidden in purple shadows as smooth as steamed velvet, half revealed by the warm orange light of the bedside lamp. Darkness molded to her body and subtly emphasized the ripe lines of it. "You mean Littlefield called?" he asked. "Yes." "When?" "About one o'clock this afternoon." She was lying on her back, but she turned slightly to face him. The shadows re-treated from her face. "Why didn't you tell me sooner?" "I knew it would spoil the evening," she said. "I was horny. As you may have noticed. And I knew that if you had Littlefield and your father to worry about, you would never be in the mood." He laughed, cupped and kissed one of her breasts. "What did the bastard want?" "I really don't know," she said. "You're to call him back. He left his home number in case you didn't get in until after five." "The hell with him," Tucker said, falling back against his pillows. Elise sat up and ran her hands through her long yellow hair, combing it into dozens of bright banners. "You'd better call him, Michael. Maybe something has happened to your father. He could be sick or hurt." "Unless the old goat died," Tucker said, "I don't want to be bothered by Littlefield." "That's cruel," she said. It was, and it hurt. "But it's also true." "Call him back anyway," she said, tucking her bright hair behind her ears. Her ears were like delicate shells. "When you are finished with him, I'll have a drink ready for you." She waited, watching him closely. The reflection of the bed-side lamp made a star in the center of each green eye. "You know, maybe your father has seen the light at long last." He laughed. "No, really. Maybe he's willing to let you have your inheritance." "Fat chance," Tucker said. "The old man never softens his stand once he's taken it. He just gets more adamant than ever. The only way I'll get what my mother left me is to fight him from one court to the next." There was

uncontrolled bitterness in his voice, and his dark eyes hardened when he thought about his father. "You've gone through a couple of courts already," she said. "And you're no further ahead." "Sooner or later," Tucker said, "I'll get a judge who is not impressed with my father's name and money. An honest judge. And the old man's high-powered, high-priced lawyers will finally make a mistake . . ." She said nothing. He looked at her, knew pretty much what she was thinking, sighed loudly. "Oh, hell . . . I guess there's always the slim chance that he's sick. And if he's sick enough, he might decide it's time for him to give in on a few points." He got up and put on a dark blue silk robe. "I'm going to need that drink when I get back." "It'll be here," Elise said. He went down the hall to the den. Albert Littlefield, his father's most trusted attorney, had a wire-thin, reedy voice that never failed to irritate Tucker. It was not a whine, as it might have been had it come from any other man, but somewhat of a sneer. It went well with Littlefield's lean, cold, patronizing, negatively aristocratic appearance and manner. "Michael, I'm so glad you called back. How have you been?" They had been on opposite sides of too many courtroom battles for Tucker to feign friendship with Littlefield. He found it difficult to be even minimally polite with the man. "What do you want?" "I'd like to see you tomorrow," Littlefield said. "About what?" "I have a proposition for you, Michael. A very fine offer from your father." "Give it to me now." "On the telephone?" "Why not?" "Well, it's quite a compromise on your father's part," the attorney said. "I would think the least you could do would be to come around to my office and hear it. Besides, it isn't really suitable stuff for the telephone. We're talking here of quite complicated terms, large sums of money . . ." "I'm not interested in compromises," Tucker said. "I simply want what is mine, my inheritance. I want the old man to stop interfering with my mother's wishes." "Have you forgotten, Michael, that it was your mother's last wish that your father maintain control of your estate and use it with his own greater fortune to increase it until such a time as you—" Tucker almost gritted his teeth. When he spoke, cutting off Littlefield, his voice was strained. "When my mother was dying, delirious, when she didn't know what she was doing, he got her to sign that damned paper, giving him guardianship over the inheritance. You know that isn't what she really wanted." Littlefield sensed that Tucker was about to hang up on him. "Michael, let's not argue, please. This is old stuff, hashed over too often already." Tucker did not reply. "Come around and see me tomorrow," Littlefield said. "You'll like what your father's proposing. You must be as weary of the courtroom as we are. Come see me for lunch, please." "I'm busy at lunchtime," Tucker said. "Three o'clock then?" Tucker thought about it. If he could pry even a fraction of his inheritance out of his father, he would be a millionaire. There would be no need at all to fly out to California, no need to set up this operation at Oceanview Plaza, no need to get inextricably involved with the unstable Frank Meyers, no need to take any more risks. He would be able to devote more of his time to his art interests. Perhaps he could even promote his free-lance dealership into a viable business that would help to pay some of the bills. And, most importantly, there would be more time to spend with Elise, more time to keep in touch with her career, to give her the support and confidence she had so often given him. . . . "Three o'clock," he agreed at last. "Wonderful," Littlefield said. "Just you and me." "Excuse me?" the lawyer said. "This meeting," Tucker said. "It's just between the two of us, right?" "Well, of course. Michael—" "I would not be at all receptive to a surprise appearance by the old man." "Just the two of us," Littlefield assured him. "And I'm certain we can come to an agreement tomorrow despite the bitterness of these last few years." "We'll see," Tucker said. He hung up. Out in the corridor again, he stood in front of the Edo shield and spear for several minutes, hoping that the sight of them would settle his nerves, as had so often been the case in the past months. This time their beauty did not affect him. Even after he had finished the drink that Elise had waiting for him in the bedroom, he was tense and jumpy. He had trouble getting to sleep. He kept waking from bad dreams, all of which involved his father, Frank Meyers, Oceanview Plaza, and dozens of

armed policemen. . . .

Ever since Elise had brought him there on a long winter's afternoon last December, the Museum of Natural History had been one of Tucker's favorite places in New York. It had everything from dinosaur skeletons and cross sections of giant redwood trees to insect and rodent exhibits, the enormous and the apparently insignificant all crammed into one great, drafty old building. A tour of the museum provided a breadth of experience and a sense of eons that was more than intellectually stimulating; indeed, it could be an emotional experience, especially for a man who, like Tucker, appreciated the antique and the primitive. Wandering through these rooms and halls, Tucker was always impressed by the fact that he was witnessing millions of years of change that, by this very evidence of its transpiration, proved the meager role of mankind in the greater workings of the universe. An hour here could make his daily problems seem petty, even laughable. This impact, this realization was especially forceful when he had time to think in a moment of quiet between the screaming packs of undisciplined schoolchildren who roamed like wild creatures through the stone halls and chambers. And one of the best places to find quiet in the museum was the Eskimo totem-pole room. Although all teachers touched on dinosaurs, redwood trees, and other wonders, few ever mentioned the Eskimo culture to their energetic charges. Therefore, the kids ran and screamed and played tag around other exhibits, leaving this place to older and much calmer heads. As usual there was a strange and mournful silence in the room. It was broken only by the hum of an electric fan that was standing on a platform by one of the doors and raking the totem poles with cool air. The lights were low, as always, the ceiling shrouded in mysterious shadows. One after another the mammoth totems rose, majestic, crude, and yet beautiful, the gnarled faces peering either straight ahead or glaring down at whatever puny men dared to walk beneath them. Edgar Bates was standing halfway along the main aisle, staring up at a fierce-looking bird-god that was staring right back down at him. "Those damned kids," he said when Tucker stopped beside him, "gave me a splitting headache." "They seldom come in here," Tucker said. Their voices, though whispers, shushed around the room and added to the funereal atmosphere. "Took four Anacins," Bates said. "But I feel like I'm about to lose the top of my scalp." "How you been?" Tucker asked. "Fine, until I ran into those kids. Screaming like ban-shees." "Doing much work lately?" "Whenever it looks good." "I need a jugger." "And I'm here to listen," Bates said. He was a solid man, an inch or two shorter than Tucker, at least forty pounds overweight, although he was not fat. With big rounded shoulders, broad chest, and short, thick legs, he might have been a Russian peasant who had spent most of his life in the fields. His face, too, was Slavic, square and well lined, capped with a shock of bushy white hair. Although he was sixty years old, not much younger than Clitus Felton, Edgar was a long way from retirement. He not only liked what he did, he defined himself almost entirely in terms of his unorthodox profession. He had no wife, no children. His talents meant so much to him not merely because they earned him large sums of money but because they made him valuable as a man, respected and appreciated by his peers. He was good, the best jugger Tucker had ever seen. He was almost an artist. He could break, file, acid-breach, finesse or blow a safe faster than any other man in the business. If he worked another twenty years, he would most likely still be the best safecracker in the country when he checked out of it. "There's a shopping center in California that was just made to be hit," Tucker said. "Shopping center?" "Hear me out." "Shopping center?" Bates wrinkled his flat face. "I know it sounds ridiculous. It isn't." "Go on then." "It's a very exclusive mall," Tucker explained quietly, his voice whispering unintelligibly around the long display room. "It doesn't cater to the average citizen. It's as if you were to round up twenty of the best businesses on Fifth Avenue and put them all under one roof. There are a handful of very exclusive dress shops—Markwood and Jame, Sasbury's . . . There's a furrier, an art gallery where the prices start at five hundred dollars a throw, a Rolls Royce dealership, a London-style tailor . . . best of all, there's a savings bank." "Ahhh," Bates said, nodding and smiling, still

looking up at the bird-god. Tucker also looked at that evil wooden countenance rather than at Bates. From a distance they seemed to be discussing the totem. "We're going to hit the bank. But the vault's probably going to be open." Bates looked away from the totem, grimaced as if in imitation of the bird-god's face. "Open? You mean you're hitting it during business hours? Then why do you need me?" "It's an after-hours job," Tucker assured him. "And the safe will be open?" "Most likely. I'll explain why in due time. First—" "But if it's open," Bates said, "why take me along?" "Just in case it isn't open," Tucker explained. "And we'll also need you to break the safe in the jewelry store next door." "You're taking jewelry?" Bates asked. "Unset stones." Bates shook his head disapprovingly, turned and looked up at the totem pole once more. His face was hard, the Slavic softness gone. His eyes were squeezed half shut, heavy but alert. "Merchandise!" he said, strong on the sarcasm. "You'll have to fence the damned stuff. And you know what a risk that is." "I know. But—" "It's almost as big a risk as taking the stuff in the first place," Bates said gruffly. "And what the hell can you get from a fence anyway? One-third the real value? More than likely, only one-fourth." "I can get a third on this," Tucker said. "Small potatoes." "Maybe better than a third." Bates cleared his throat, would have spat on the floor if this had not been a museum. "It's always best to take cash. Only cash. Never merchandise." "I agree," Tucker said. "You've worked with me before. You know I usually pull cash jobs. But unset stones are eminently fenceable. And these ought to be worth half a million. Perhaps two hundred thousand to us when we sell them. I'd be surprised if we get more than a hundred thousand out of the bank." "Half a million in uncut stones tucked away in a little jewelry-store safe?" Bates asked, surprised. "It's a big, expensive safe," Tucker said, smiling. "I told you this was no ordinary shopping mall. This jewelry store makes rings and necklaces to order. It doesn't sell nineteen-dollar watches, Edgar." "Tell me more," Bates said. Tucker told him all of it, the whole layout and every step of the plan. He tried to make it sound especially sweet, for he wanted Edgar Bates more than he did any other jugger. Although he had a reputation as an extremely cool and calm operator, Tucker was routinely frightened and tightly wound when he was in the middle of a heist, regardless of whether the job was going well or disastrously. He always projected an aura of self-assurance, was always quick to lead, a sure commander—all the while seething inside. However, when he worked with men like Edgar Bates, he was considerably more relaxed than when he had to deal strictly with Frank Meyers's type. "If the jeweler's safe isn't too difficult for you, we should be able to pull off the entire operation in less than one hour." He looked sideways at Bates. "Sound reasonable to you?" "Sure," Bates said. He looked away from the Eskimo art-work. "But what about this Frank Meyers?" "What about him?" Tucker asked. "You trust him?" "Do you know him?" Tucker parried. "I've heard the name, I think. But I've never worked with the man. Do you think he noticed everything he should have noticed? No guards or alarms that he might have over-looked?" "He's got every detail," Tucker said, remembering the care put into the diagram of Oceanview Plaza. He did not mention his other reservations about Meyers. If Bates came in on this, the two of them could make up for any boner that Meyers might pull. "Are you with us?" "You the boss?" Bates asked. "I always am." "Just checking." He looked up and down the display room and saw that they were alone except for a thin, bearded young man who was studying a totem twenty yards away. He turned his gaze on the bird-god again, studied the splintered beak and the madly gleaming eyes. A group of thirty or forty screaming schoolchildren raced past one of the doors, filling the chamber with maniacal echoes, remnants of eerie high-pitched laughter. When silence returned like a fog drifting in, the jugger said, "I'm along for the ride, then." Tucker almost sighed aloud with relief. "When?" Bates asked. "Next Wednesday." "Suits me." "We'll stay in Los Angeles," Tucker said. "I have a hotel picked out. It has over four hundred rooms, so no one will notice us or remember us later. We'll check in separately and drive out to the mall for the job." "Will we have a chance to look this Oceanview over first-hand?" Bates

asked. "Of course. We can explore it all afternoon before we hit it at closing time." "Three men," Bates mused, "doesn't seem like enough." "It is." They ironed out the minor details of time and rendezvous in Los Angeles, then left the display room by different exits. The leering, hawk-nosed, painted faces of the monstrous totems stared after them with fierce intent.

"This is only a compromise, not a complete surrender," Albert Littlefield said as he settled into the high-backed leather chair behind his desk. "I want to be certain that you understand this straightaway, Michael. Your father is willing to be generous, but he is not willing to meet all of your demands." They made no small talk. The ice between them was much too thick to break. He sensed Tucker's attitude and knew the briefer the meeting the better for both of them. "Go on, then," Tucker said, knowing already that it was really useless for Littlefield to continue. A compromise was not going to be good enough. Littlefield's office seemed to be designed to match the chilly mood that separated the two men. The walls were white, unmarked, like partitions of snow. The ice-blue vinyl furniture looked cold and uncomfortable, all square and sharply angled, harsh and plain. The bindings of the hundreds of legal texts—green, brown, dull red—were matched and sterile, nearly hypnotizing the eye. The man suited his office, Tucker thought. Littlefield was tall, slender, composed of sharp angles. His face was long and thin, with a fresh but slightly milky complexion. Arrow-straight, his nose was slightly flared around the nostrils, as if he were constantly sniffing some odor that offended him. His colorless lips were taut bow lines. He was clearly well bred, from a background of wealth and position, although he had none of the charm and personal easiness that most often accompanied the strong self-confidence of the aristocrat. Indeed, he was quite reserved and prim enough to fit comfortably the part of an eighteenth-century schoolmaster. Littlefield folded his hands on the desk, his sticklike fingers pressed together at the tips. "As you know, Michael, your father has established for you a ten-thousand-dollar monthly allowance drawn from the earnings of your trust fund. Thus far, forty-two of these checks have been issued. Since you have consistently refused to accept them, they have been deposited in a special account in your name." Tucker did not bother to explain why he had summarily rejected this apparent windfall. They both knew that by signing the waiver to be eligible for the dole, he would be endorsing his father's control of his mother's estate even before he spent the first penny. He would be signing away his right to file any further suits in federal court and would be limiting himself to the role of a minor for the remainder of his father's life if not his own. Besides, ten thousand dollars a month was not enough, not when a single Edo spear went for sixty-five thousand dollars. . . . "In the past," Littlefield continued, "you have said that the wording of the waiver was unacceptable, the conditions much too stringent." "I'm sure I reacted much more strongly than that," Tucker said. "I probably indicated that it was not only unacceptable but immoral and almost criminal as well." The lawyer's smile was brittle. "Well . . . Your father has now drafted a new waiver which should be more to your liking and which should not stand between you and your allowance." He opened a manila folder that lay atop his desk, took out a single sheet of yellow paper, leaned across the desk and tried to hand it to Tucker. "If you'll take a moment to read this, you'll see how generous the offer really is." "Why don't you read it to me?" Tucker asked, not bothering to rise out of his chair to accept the paper. Littlefield colored slightly, then settled back. "Rather than bore you with the legalese, why don't I summarize the main points?" "Fine," Tucker said. Littlefield put the paper down and peered at his buffed and manicured nails for a moment. "First of all, your monthly allowance is being raised to fifteen thousand dollars so that it will be more in line with what you have often said you require. This takes quite a toll of the trust earnings, but it is a compromise your father is willing to make." Tucker waited. Discreetly clearing his throat behind one hand, Littlefield looked down at the legal document again. "Second, all of the money thus far paid to you in uncashed allowance checks will be made available in one lump sum." He raised his eyes from the paper, stared at Tucker, sighed when he received no encouragement. He shook his head, leaned back in his chair. "Furthermore, your father no longer requires that you come to work for him as soon as you accept the allowance. In fact, he does not require that you work for him full time at all." "But part time?" Tucker asked

sourly. Littlefield nodded. "Just two days a week." "I see." "Even on that sort of schedule, you should gradually be able to learn the workings of your father's companies and get a grasp of the management of the family fortune." Tucker held up one open palm, silencing the lawyer. "I don't want to get a grasp of the management of the family fortune," he said wearily. "I thought that was clear by now. As you must know, the last thing I want to become is a money manager like the old man. I want to enjoy life. I don't want to spend all my time in banks and board rooms, working up ulcers. That attitude may frighten my father. It does frighten him. That's why he wrangled that signature from my mother when she was dying. But there is no way he can manipulate me to get me into his world." "You're turning down this offer?" Littlefield asked. "Precisely." "I wish you would reconsider—" "No chance," Tucker said, getting to his feet. "You've judged your father too harshly." "You think so?" Tucker asked, looking down at the lawyer, trying to control his anger. "He was so damned wrapped up in his schemes for making more and more money that he lost all touch with his family. And out of touch, he eventually lost the ability to love us. We were a family of strangers. He sent me to boarding schools, saw me on holidays, never wrote me letters . . . If my mother had not been gentle and weak, she'd have divorced him, because she had become as much of a stranger to him as I had. They hardly ever talked. They went days without seeing each other. He kept a string of mistresses, so that he didn't even need her to sleep with him. Hell, he flaunted those women as if he not only didn't love her but also wanted to hurt her." If his mother had been more like Elise, Tucker thought, she would have freed herself of the old man. Why couldn't she have been stronger? "You think I've judged him too harshly? Christ, I've been easy on him." "Isn't it an expression of love for your father to want you to eventually take over the family businesses?" Littlefield asked. "Don't you think that—" "No love involved," Tucker said. "It's simply a matter of his pride. He's determined to dominate me. He won't rest until he has forced me to do what he wants. Littlefield, my father lost touch with me so long ago that he doesn't even realize yet that I'm a man with a mind of my own. He insists on thinking of me as a bad little boy who must be punished, threatened, and cajoled into doing as he's told." He turned away and walked across the ice-blue carpet to the door. "Michael," the lawyer called when Tucker twisted the knob. "One more thing." He turned around. "What is it?" Littlefield had gotten out of his chair, was standing very stiff and straight. "However you may be earning a living—it's far less admirable than the way your father makes his." Feeling his heartbeat suddenly increase, Tucker released the doorknob and said, "What on earth is so despicable about dealing in primitive art?" Littlefield smirked. "We both know that you can't be making so terribly much from that." "Do we?" Tucker asked, both frightened and amused by the turn that the conversation had taken. "Sooner or later we'll discover where all your money comes from," Littlefield said, his reedy voice taking on a nasty undertone. "And then you may have to compromise." "Are you insinuating that I'm involved in something illegal?" Tucker hoped his voice conveyed genuine surprise. Littlefield said nothing, just stood there with that madden-ingly superior smile on his face. He would have made a good head waiter or doorman for a fancy restaurant, Tucker thought. "Why don't you put the cops onto me? Or even the Internal Revenue Service?" "We don't want you in jail," Littlefield said. "We just want you where you belong—in the family again." "You people think you can conduct human relationships like you would a business merger," Tucker said. "You're all barbarians." He opened the door and slammed it when he went out. He would have to start watching for tails again. It sounded as though his father were ready to hire another batch of private investigators to get to the truth about his son's life.

From a public telephone booth on the edge of Central Park, Tucker called Frank Meyers to tell him that everything was on for the next Wednesday in California, and then he went home. Because the usual gray-green polluted overcast was gone and the autumn sun was streaming down like golden curtains between the buildings, he decided to walk. He kept looking behind for one of his father's private detectives, but he could not spot anyone who might have been tailing him. The early Friday afternoon rush had begun, the sidewalks crowded with people who were in a hurry to get nowhere, but he was still reasonably certain that he was not being followed. Back at the apartment, he mixed himself a drink and sat in the den thinking about Meyers and Edgar Bates and the new job. He turned the Oceanview Plaza operation over and over in his mind, worrying it like a cat with a large ball of string. There were a few loose ends. However, he was happily unable to tie them in. The plan was good. Elise arrived home just before five o'clock, came into the den and perched on the arm of his easy chair. "How did it go with Littlefield?" "Terribly." "I thought they wanted to compromise." "That was the problem," Tucker said. They went out to the Spanish Pavilion for dinner, drank a great deal of sangria, and went home for a sound night's sleep. That set the tone for the remainder of the weekend. They went to a couple of good films, did some light reading, watched an old horror movie on television, made love more than once, and generally lazed around. The only bad moment in this brief idyll was a vivid night-mare from which Tucker woke early on Sunday morning. He had dreamed, once again, about the shopping mall they were going to hit and about his father and about dozens of police-men who pursued him down endless glass-walled corridors and around counters heaped high with jewelry and other merchandise. This time there was a great deal of gun play and blood. He could not easily get back to sleep. Lingered impressions of the nightmare haunted him. The following day, Elise and life seemed twice as precious as they ever had before. Monday morning, after Elise had left to attend several interviews for commercial work, Tucker put his real credentials in the living-room closet safe and removed those bearing the Tucker name. Then he went out and caught a cab and went to Radio City Music Hall where he called Clitus Felton from a telephone booth. First thing when he phoned back, Felton said, "I'm afraid this is a waste of money." "You didn't learn anything?" "I asked around. But there wasn't anything to learn." "Maybe you didn't ask enough people." "I asked everyone I could find. Everyone. Hell, you know how I work, Mike." He sounded hurt that Tucker would question his thoroughness. As inactive as he was these days, his reputation was all that Clitus Felton had, and he guarded it jealously. The receiver still pressed to his ear, Tucker sighed loudly and closed his eyes and put his forehead against the phone box and thought about things for a long moment. "Do you happen to know what his last job was?" "Oh," Felton said, "Frank worked with that armored car company out in Milwaukee." "When was this?" "Six months ago." "I believe I remember now." "You should remember," Felton said. "Frank did extremely well out there." "Who were his consultants on that one?" Tucker asked, opening his eyes and staring down at the crushed cigarette butts and chewing-gum wrappers that littered the booth floor. "Lindsay, Phillips, Spooner, and Pierce," Felton said, as if he were reading off the name of a high-powered stock brokerage. "You talked to each of them?" "To Lindsay and Pierce," Felton said. "I couldn't get hold of the other two." "What did Lindsay and Pierce have to say?" "I already told you, Mike. Nothing. They think Frank's a fine man, a real pro." Tucker leaned back away from the phone box, looking at the booth's ceiling now instead of at the filthy floor. "Dammit, I know there's something wrong with him!" "Listen," Clitus said, "there is one thing—" The long-distance operator interrupted, asking for more money. Felton grumbled, fumbled noisily with a pile of change, fed the machine what she said he must. "What one thing?" Tucker asked when the operator cut out of the line. "You notice the way Frank talks?" the old man asked. "Like a frog." "He was treated very badly about two-and-a-half years back. Got mixed up with the wrong crowd—the organized group. You know who I mean?" "Italian fellows," Tucker said. "Most of them," Felton agreed. "Anyway,

he was hurt badly. He was in the hospital more than eight weeks, couldn't talk again for six months. That kind of thing can change a man. It can put some fear into him." "This is more than fear," Tucker said. "Maybe not," Felton said. "And even if Frank's a little more nervous than he used to be, he's a good man." "I guess I'll have to hope you're right," Tucker said. Felton said, "If you aren't sure of this, why don't you just forget it?" "Because I'm desperate," Tucker said. "Sorry to hear that." "It's not your fault," Tucker said. "Good-bye, Clitus." He hung up and pushed open the booth door. Out on the street again, he flagged down a taxi and gave the driver a Queens' address that was only a few blocks away from his real destination—Imrie's place. "I don't like to go out to Queens," the driver said. He was a big, good-looking man with neatly clipped salt-and-pepper hair. He bore a strong resemblance to Peter Lawford, looked more like an executive who had escaped from the corporate grind than like a cabby. "You'll get a fifty per cent tip," Tucker said. The driver smiled. "Well, that's mighty decent of you. It's about impossible to pick up a return fare from out there. And every minute I ride around empty, I'm losing money." "Sure," Tucker said. When they had pulled into the traffic flow, he said, "You always been a cab driver?" "About a year now," the driver said, smiling into the rear-view mirror. "I'll bet you were a corporation executive." "Wrong," the driver said. "I was a physicist with NASA. But everyone stopped caring about the future." "Isn't that the truth," Tucker agreed. In Queens, when he had paid the driver and watched the cab pull out of sight, Tucker looked at his watch: 12:01. He was anxious to pick up the Skorpions. Once he had those, once he was taking the risk of possessing illegal weaponry, he knew that he would feel more committed to the operation and more sure of himself. By 12:45 he had tested the guns in Imrie's basement range and had paid for them. Imrie packed the three Skorpions in an old, battered Samsonite suitcase, added several boxes of ammunition and cushioned everything with old newspapers. Tucker took the suitcase outside, walked four blocks to the bus stop, and caught a bus into Manhattan. In Penn Station he fished a quarter from his pocket and rented a locker, slid the case inside, closed the double-strength door and tested it, then pocketed the red key. Shortly after three o'clock, back at the apartment on Park Avenue, he packed a second bag, this one full of his own clothes and toiletries. When he was satisfied that he had not forgotten anything, he sat down at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee, a notepad and a pen. He wrote a short note to Elise: A sudden business deal has come up. I'm flying out to San Francisco this afternoon to negotiate the sale of a twelfth-century jade figurine. Northern Sung Dynasty. Should fetch a good price. Should be back in a few days. If not, I'll call. Love, Mike. Displeased by the need to lie, Tucker got up, picked up his suitcase, and left the apartment. Outside, the doorman got a cab for him, and he went back down to Penn Station. He retrieved the Skorpions from the rented locker and caught a late-afternoon train to Philadelphia. That was the first step of a complex, carefully planned journey to Santa Monica, California.

Facing the main highway and the Pacific Ocean just beyond, the shopping mall stood on a large chunk of choice real estate. It was approximately three hundred yards on a side, a big square structure of pebbled white concrete and gleaming glass doors. Although the stores inside were all on a single floor, the roof rose in a sweep of fake grass, in imitation of the thatched, peaked top of a South Seas islander's hut. It should have been tasteless. However, the architect had fortunately been a man with some talent and a good eye for harmony. Sheltered by stands of thriving palm trees and well-tended hedgerows, Oceanview Plaza looked cool and pleasant and decidedly exclusive. There was no gaudy billboard out front, no sign advertising stores and special sales. A single line of parking spaces flanked the tree-shrouded walk in front of the building. On the south side there was only a two-lane drive, no parking spaces whatsoever. Instead, here the land grew jumbled, rocky, and spotted with palms and scrub, dropping to the highway and then down to the glaringly white beach. On the north there was parking for perhaps five hundred cars, which was also the case behind the mall on its east face. Most of the automobiles parked there right now were Cadillacs, Mark-IVs, Thunderbirds, and expensive sports cars. "Frank, just look at all these wonderful luxurious cars," Edgar Bates said from the back seat as they approached Oceanview Plaza. "What about them?" Meyers asked, braking their own car. "Why couldn't you steal us a nice comfortable Cadillac?" Bates asked as their weak-sprung, half-rusted station wagon bounced sickeningly from the highway to the mall's entrance drive. "I'm truly sorry, Edgar," Meyers said. He was in better form now than he had been back East. "But this was the only one I found that had keys in it." The three of them had driven out here in Edgar's rented Pontiac that afternoon, and now they were back in a stolen car, which could not be traced to any of them. If something went wrong and the wagon had to be abandoned in a moment of crisis, it would not be any danger to them. The cops would learn nothing from it. Of course by tomorrow morning it would be a very hot item. That did not matter. They were only going to need it for an hour or two. Meyers pulled the slightly battered, peach-colored Oldsmobile into the northside parking area, went past all the Cadillacs, which gleamed in the darkness with purple reflections of the overhead mercury vapor lights. He drove around behind the mall and stopped in a space next to several medium-line Fords, Chevrolets, and cheap foreign imports. "Just like I said," he told the other two. "Here's the employee parking." He pointed straight ahead through the windshield at the mall's rear entrance. "All the clerks and managers will come out of that door." Tucker looked at his watch. "Nine-thirty," he said. "They'll be closing in half an hour. We'd better move ass." He opened the Samsonite suitcase that was on the seat between him and Frank Meyers, passed out the Skorpions and the ammunition. "Hellish-looking things," Edgar Bates said. Like Tucker, he worked with guns quite often but had never come to trust or like them. "Are you sure we wouldn't be better off carrying a couple of good old-fashioned forty-fives, Mike?" "I'm sure," Tucker said without turning around to look at the jugger. "This is best." Meyers held his gun below the window level and stared hard at the shadowed lines of it, traced the folded wire stock with his blunt fingers. "Now I see what you meant about psychology, Tucker. Who in the hell would ever try to go up against something this damned ugly?" "No one," Tucker said. "I hope." "I've never used anything like this before," Bates said. "How does it handle?" "Point it and pull the trigger," Tucker said. "Really?" "How else?" "How's the kick?" Bates asked skeptically. "Not bad." "You've tried one?" "I've tried all three," Tucker said. "Which way does mine pull—left or right?" Bates asked. "It doesn't." "Not even a little bit?" "No." "I've never used a gun that held perfectly steady on the target," the jugger said doubtfully. Tucker said, "The fellow who provided these is a first-rate gunsmith. He cleaned these up, even rebored the barrels. The guns are better than new." He was aware of Edgar's nervousness and sympathized with him. He hoped his calm, almost whispered explanations would soothe the older man. In the dull violet light that filtered through the windows, they finished loading and pocketed more ammunition. Frank Meyers was breathing too heavily

but seemed much im-proved otherwise. In fact, he seemed too improved in too short a time. Perhaps he was the sort of man who wasted away from inactivity but regained his gloss when he was in the midst of action. Nevertheless, Tucker distrusted sudden personality changes even when he thought he knew the reasons for them. "Didn't you have to pass through a metal detector at the airport?" Bates asked, leaning forward from the rear seat. "Didn't they examine your luggage? The way they screen for hijackers these days, I don't see how you could have gotten these things all the way across the country." "I took a train to Philadelphia," Tucker said, stuffing the bulky pistol into his waistband and buttoning his loose jacket over it. "Then I hopped a chartered shuttle for Cleveland." "And they don't search your baggage on a shuttle flight?" Bates asked. "Not on the really small regional airlines," Tucker said. "They don't have the resources or the time." Meyers worked his Skorpion under his wide belt, concealed it with his blue-and-white-striped seersucker jacket. "Where did you go from Cleveland?" "I took another chartered plane to Kansas City," Tucker said. In Kansas City he had caught the first flight out to Denver, had gone from Denver to Reno on a third plane. In Reno he had boarded a Greyhound bus for the short trip in to San Francisco. "From there I caught another plane down to Los Angeles," he said. "It took a lot longer than a through flight from New York would have taken, but then I couldn't have gotten aboard a through flight with the Skorpions." Bates shook his head admiringly. "And you didn't have to pass through a metal detector or open a single suitcase for inspection?" "That's right." "I think I see why no one ever objects to your being the boss," Meyers said. His voice contained a note of genuine amusement, something of which he had seemed incapable when Tucker had met with him back in New York. Why this change in the man? And how long could it be expected to last? Tucker looked at his watch again. "We're wasting time. Is everybody ready?" They got out of the car and closed the doors. Edgar Bates put down his briefcaselike satchel full of tools, and they all stripped off the thin cotton gloves they had worn while in the stolen station wagon, putting the gloves into their pockets for use later in the night. The chance of leaving behind an identifiable fingerprint on anything but a just-washed drinking glass was negligible. Television and movies had greatly exaggerated the threat of fingerprint science to the modern criminal. Nevertheless, they took the precaution of wearing gloves. Tucker insisted on it. "Well," Meyers said, "shall we go earn a living?"

Each face of the Oceanview Plaza building contained an entrance precisely midway in its length. Each set of these heavy glass doors opened onto a wide terrazo-floored corridor where there were shops on both sides. Decorated with rec-tangular stone planters full of miniature palms and ferns and other tropical plants, the public corridors all converged under the peaked ceiling of the mall's lounge. The core of the building was this circular lobby of slightly more than a hundred-foot diameter, with its dark wood paneling and its sloped ceiling coming to a dramatic point fifty feet overhead. There were padded benches here where weary shoppers could pause and regain their strength. Full-length mirrors were set at regular intervals in the walls, a convenient place to check, surreptitiously as one walked past them, that one's appearance was, indeed, impeccable. The lounge contained more planters and plants than did the corridors, providing a fresh, natural, relaxing atmosphere. In the very center of the lounge there was a deep pool, another circle, this one about forty feet in diameter. It was sided with lavalike stone and low green ferns. Hundreds of jets of water fountained out of hidden nozzles in those stones, made patterns in the air, rained down on the surface of the pool with a soft shushing sound. A colorful free-standing sign-board nearby informed the casual shopper that a world-famous novelty diving act would perform in the mall daily during the following week. Apparently, even exclusive shop-ping centers full of the most expensive shops needed to run an occasional promotional stunt. Tucker sat on one of the benches, hands folded on his lap to make sure his coat didn't stretch tight across the outlines of the Skorpion. When they had first come into the building through the east doors, the three men had split up for tacti-cal reasons. Now, as he waited for the proper moment to rejoin Meyers and Bates at their prearranged rendezvous point, he watched the flow of commerce around him. Only four places of business were situated so that their fronts faced out on the lounge and the fountain. On the northeast quarter of the circular chamber stood Shen Yang's Orient, an import shop with windows full of handsome ivory and jade art, hand-woven carpets, and hand-carved screens. Nothing in Shen Yang's Orient bore a price tag, which meant it was all very dignified and priced at three times its real retail value. Only a few shoppers were poking around in the oriental shop, and the Japanese proprietor was already beginning to close up for the day. On the northwest side of the lounge Henry's Gaslight Restaurant, a favorite place for luncheons and early dinners in Santa Monica, had served its last desserts and was politely but firmly saying good-by to its customers. On the southwest side the House of Books was still fairly busy, even though the manager had begun to turn out a few of the lights at the back of the store. This was, as far as Tucker had ever seen, the only large bookstore outside of New York that handled no paperbacks, that dealt solely in the more expensive hard covers and higher-priced gift books. Behind him, on the southeast corner of the lounge, Young Maiden, a clothing store for the tradition-bound girl, had closed its doors after its last customer. Those four stores were indicative of the state of the remaining fifteen. Only a handful of shoppers yet prowled the mall. Shortly, there would be none. The clerks and managers would leave, too. And the job could begin at last. It was going to work. The operation had sounded like the ravings of a madman when Frank Meyers first began to talk about it. It was too risky, too dangerous. But it was going to work. It had to work. Aside from the fact he needed the money, Tucker could not endure failure. He was neurotic about success. He took a job only when he felt he could pull it off. If he failed, even once, he would play into his father's hands, which bothered him more than the idea of spending ten years in federal prison. Only one thing marred his cultured optimism. He had seen a room that was not on Meyers's diagram. In the west corridor at the front of the mall there was a dark wood door labeled: oceanview plaza business office. He knew the existence of this office in no way affected their plans, yet he was bothered by Meyers's omission of it on the master white-print. Why overlook this one detail? He looked at his wristwatch, decided it was time to move. Rising, adjusting his jacket to be sure that it continued to conceal the Skorpion, he walked back

the eastern corridor down which he had come when they had first entered the mall. On the left was a Rolls-Citroën-Maserati-Jaguar dealer-ship, a gleaming showroom full of elegant automobiles. Beyond that was Surf and Subsurface, a tasteful and richly appointed sporting-goods store—surfboards and aqualungs on lush Freeport carpet, shotguns displayed in a blue-velvet-lined case—which made Abercrombie & Fitch appear positively plebeian by comparison. On his right was the Toolbox Lounge, where the help was even now gently but insistently saying good-bye to its last high-society drunkard. Beyond the bar was the entrance to the mall warehouse and maintenance center. It was here that Tucker opened a gray door marked employees only and stepped out of the corridor. Meyers and Bates were waiting with drawn Skorpions. Tucker said, "Don't shoot." "What's it like out there?" Meyers asked, lowering the gun. "They're closing up." The big man smiled. "Right on schedule." "Frank, I looked the place over, and I've been wondering why you didn't include the mall office on your diagram." He watched Meyers closely. "Didn't I?" Meyers asked. "Just an oversight." Intuitively, Tucker knew that it was more than that, but he saw no way or no real reason to pursue the issue. He liked Meyers's new personality, this more competent version. He didn't want to do anything that would bring back the New York City slob. "We only have to wait," Bates said, wiping perspiration from his wide forehead. He was never comfortable on a job until he was working on a safe, applying his skill. Then he was steady, self-assured, altogether at ease. "Just wait," he repeated. "I hope that's all," Tucker said. The warehouse was as large as any store in the mall, larger than most of them. It was fully four hundred feet long, sixty feet wide, with a twenty-foot-high ceiling. Just inside the door stood a scarred workbench, a heavy-duty vise, a jigsaw, and all the other tools the maintenance men would need to keep the building in good repair. The remainder of the room was given over to storage. The floor was marked off into nineteen sections of varying size, one for each of the retail outlets in the mall, and every section was stacked with cartons, crates, and drums of goods that would eventually be taken via electric-powered carts and fork lifts to the many stores under this one roof. Those electric vehicles were parked in a row beside barrels of cleaning compounds and floor waxes. Two corrugated steel garage doors, each as high as the room and wide enough to admit the back end of a large truck, were set in the east wall. The warehouse had no windows. With the garage doors closed and dogged down tight, as they were now, all light came from fluorescent tubes framed in sheet-metal reflectors twenty feet overhead. This cold, blue-white glare, combined with the cinder-block walls and plain cement floor, too closely resembled the decor of hospitals and prisons. It made Tucker decidedly ill at ease. Tucker looked at his watch. "Ten o'clock on the nose," said Bates, who had looked at his own watch in chorus with Tucker. "Fifteen or twenty minutes and we should be able to move." He looked at Meyers. "Are you certain there aren't maintenance men on duty now?" Meyers laughed softly and slapped the smaller man on the back. The sound of that gentle blow whispered back from the ceiling and the cold cement walls. "Have I been wrong about anything else? Look, the maintenance men work a regular nine-to-five shift. They're long gone. No one's going to walk in on us unexpectedly." Bates ran one strong, stubby-fingered hand through his white hair and tried to smile. But he could not manage anything more than a pained grimace. "Don't mind me," he said. "I've never been much good at waiting around." Taking the Skorpion from his waistband and tightening his belt, Tucker said, "What about the guard dog?" "He's just where I told you he'd be," Meyers said, pointing over his shoulder. "Big brute," Edgar said. Tucker walked past the other two men, down a narrow aisle between ten-foot stacks of merchandise, all the way to the far end of the room. The dog, a healthy young German shepherd with a beautiful coat, was there and waiting at attention, alerted by Tucker's footsteps. It was chained to a thick iron ring that was set firmly in a cement-block wall. Ears flattened along its lupine skull, wicked teeth bared, it strained forward until the chain was taut, focusing its fierce black eyes on Tucker. It growled quietly in the back of its throat, but it did not

bark or attempt to lunge at him. "Nice dog," Tucker said, hunkering down to the animal's level, though keeping a few feet between them. The dog growled a bit louder, a sound like a broken engine chugging away beneath layers and layers of insulation. Thick saliva glistened on its teeth and dripped from the corners of its black lips. "Good dog," Tucker said, though the damned thing fright-ened him. "Good, quiet dog." The shepherd snapped at him this time, scabbled at the floor with its claws, and tried to close the gap between them. Tucker stood up again. "Lousy, rotten mutt," he said. The two night watchmen had brought the dog with them when they had come on duty at nine o'clock. That was part of the protection package the mall bought from their com-pany: two men, one dog. The guards had chained the shepherd here, and at nine-thirty they had gone out into the mall itself to help with the flushing out of the last-minute customers. They would check and lock the public rest rooms, inspect all the architectural cul-de-sacs to be certain that no accidental or intended stragglers were left in the building after closing time. They would shut down the north, west, and south entrances and see that all the clerks, salesmen, and store managers left by the east exit, the back doors. Then, when they were alone in the building—except for the bank's manager and assistant manager, who, according to Meyers, always stayed late on Wednesday—the guards would come back to the warehouse to release the dog. Except that tonight the shepherd was going to remain where he was, chained to the wall. Tucker went back across the room and stood by the door with Bates and Meyers. "Everything okay?" Meyers nodded vigorously. His grin was so wide that it was nearly imbecilic, and his eyes seemed to Haze. "Nothing out of the ordinary. It's going to go like clockwork. A few of them have already left, and the rest are leaving now." Tucker listened closely at the gray door. He could hear a number of salesclerks laughing and talking as they passed the warehouse entrance and went through the doors of the mall's east exit just a few feet down the corridor. Most of them were calling good night to someone named Chet and another man named Artie. Chet and Artie were probably the two night watchmen. Leaning away from the door, Tucker glanced at a set of shelves on his right, and for the first time he saw two thermos bottles and two sparkling aluminum lunch buckets. Though they were only inanimate objects, there was some-thing pathetic about them. Chet and Artie wouldn't have an opportunity to eat their late-night snack or enjoy the card game that most likely went with it. After a while Tucker looked at his watch. "A quarter past ten," he said. "Soon, now," Meyers said, clutching the Skorpion in both hands, one thick finger through the trigger guard. "What about the dog?" Bates asked. He was sweating profusely now, and his face was especially pale. His voice was not as loud as a whisper. "What about him?" Tucker asked. Bates's eyebrows were beaded with sweat, like twin cater-pillars crawling through dew. He blinked the salty fluid out of his eyes. "Mean-looking bastard, isn't he?" He shuddered as he thought of the German shepherd. "He could tear off your arm if he really wanted to do it." Tucker and Meyers looked at each other. Before the big man could say anything, Tucker said, "Look, he's chained to the wall. He will be chained to the wall the whole time that we're here." "Sure, sure," Bates said in a self-deprecating tone of voice. "I know that. Don't bother with me. Don't pay me any mind. It's just that I hate waiting. Waiting makes me nervous as hell. But I'll be in shape when the crunch comes." "I'm wondering if you will," Meyers whispered, giving Bates a hard, cold look. "Believe me," Tucker said, "Edgar will come through. He does every time. He's always shaky at the start, but once he's working on a safe, he's steady as a rock." "And when he's finished with the safe?" Meyers asked, as if they were talking about someone who was not present. "Then," Bates said, as if he objected to being talked over, "I'm so delighted with my handiwork that I fairly float along for days afterward." "It's true," Tucker said. "You see," Bates told Meyers, "there's nothing to me except my work. I'm hollow, otherwise." Tucker knew that what Bates said was fairly close to the truth. Except when he was dealing with a vault door or a fancy combination lock, the old jugger had no self-confidence whatsoever. He was extremely gentle, passive, withdrawn, the

willing victim of an inferiority complex. Right now he felt utterly worthless and helpless, as vulnerable as a child. But when he started to work on the safe, he would have the self-assurance of Superman. "Twenty-five after ten," Meyers said, looking at his watch. "Everyone should be out by now." He lowered the ugly Skorpion until it centered on the gray door, and he grinned idiotically once more. A moment later the laughter and conversation in the corridor stopped. Now there were only Chet and Artie swapping jokes while they locked and tested the glass doors. Edgar swallowed loudly. "Here they come," Tucker whispered. Meyers stiffened. The two watchmen opened the warehouse door and walked inside. They were both about six feet, both middle-aged men who had retired after twenty years on a real police force, both of them going to flab and both a great deal slower to react than they once had been. They were so engrossed in the dirty story one of them was telling that neither was immediately aware of the presence of the three intruders. They took half a dozen steps into the room before they realized there was something wrong. Then, just at the punch line, they looked up and froze, shocked at the sight of three men with automatic weapons. "Take it easy," Tucker said in a reassuringly mellow voice. "Don't go for your guns." The guards blinked stupidly. They still did not get it. They had evidently been off a regular police force more than a few months. They were acting like amateurs. "If you try for a gun," Meyers said, leveling the Skorpion, "I'll have to blow your brains out." In his gravel-toned voice, the threat sounded genuine. With that, they were committed. They were in it too deep now to just walk away and forget the whole thing. They had gained control of Oceanview Plaza without spilling a drop of blood, just as Frank Meyers had promised. It was easy. Indeed, it seemed almost too easy. Tucker was worried about that.

Morose as a pair of slack-faced hound dogs, the watchmen were sitting on the floor, their shoulders against the wall, legs straight out in front of them. Their hands were bound behind their backs, ankles securely tied together with strong copper wire Edgar Bates had produced from his battered black satchel full of safecracking tools. The largest of the guards, who was two inches taller and fifteen pounds flabbier than his companion, was a florid man in his late forties or early fifties. Beneath the beer belly and the glowing nose of the quasi-alcoholic, he looked grizzled and mean. His eyes were bracketed by hard folds of flesh, and laugh lines slashed his drooping cheeks like sword wounds. Tucker thought the man had probably been a high school football jock in his day, a combat soldier, and a real sonofabitch in a police uniform. Like most of his type, a large part of his hard-nosed image would be a bluff. However, deep inside somewhere he would have that peculiar, violent, dangerous American sense of machismo. Because of that he might do something foolish. He looked up at Tucker as Bates put away what was left of the roll of copper wire, and he said, "You won't get away with this, you little bastard." Tucker smiled. "You watch a lot of television, don't you? You have your lines down just pat." The watchman colored. He narrowed his eyes and made a tight, grim line of his mouth. "I've got your face filed away. I have absolutely every detail of it memorized. Hell, I have all of your faces memorized." His Skorpion casually pointed at the man's face, Frank Meyers stepped forward, a singularly menacing presence with his horror-movie voice. "You're pretty damn dumb," he said nastily, meeting the guard's hostile stare. "He'll be okay," Tucker said, quickly dismissing Meyers before the watchman could respond and exacerbate the situation. Tucker could sense an almost natural antagonism between these two men. They were the sort who seemed to react chemically from the moment of first contact, the sort who would be at one another's throats with little provocation. And that could not be allowed. He knelt down beside the guard and smiled at him. "Which one are you—Chet or Artie?" Both of the watchmen were surprised. "How'd you know our names?" the mean one demanded. Tucker sighed. "I stood at that door and listened to everyone in the mall say good night to you." The ex-cop was disgusted with himself for not figuring it out right away. "Which are you?" Tucker insisted quietly. "Chet," the mean one said. The important thing, Tucker knew, was to soothe Chet's battered pride, doctor his bruised machismo. The less like a fool that Chet felt, the more cooperative he would be. "Chet, I know you're not the kind of man who takes this sort of thing easily. You're not used to letting anyone get the jump on you. But now it's happened, and you have to make the best of it. My friend here," he said, pointing to Frank Meyers, "will be right out in the corridor watching over the east exit. Every once in a while he'll look in on you. He will not want to see you struggling to get loose. You don't want to make him nervous. There isn't any reason for anyone to get killed here tonight." Chet glared at him but said nothing. His mouth just got tighter, his eyes narrower. "No one's going to think less of you because you let us pull this thing off," Tucker said patiently. "You were completely surprised. Hell, anyone would have been surprised. You did everything right. But we had machine guns. And there were more of us than there were of you . . ." The watchman seemed to relax slightly. Some of the stiffness went out of him, and his lips took on color again. He stopped straining so steadily against his wire bonds. Tucker looked at the second man. He was only fractionally less physically formidable than Chet, but he had none of the other man's inner fire. He was pale and obviously frightened. "You don't see any reason to get yourself killed, do you, Artie?" Tucker asked. "No," Artie said. "Good for you," Tucker said. Chet gave the other man a cool look. Then he looked at Tucker again and said, "The way I have your faces memorized, the police will be able to work up a good composite drawing of you. Your faces will be plastered in every station house in the country. You'll never get away with this. Never." "Maybe you're right," Tucker said, getting to his feet. "I am. You'll see." "We'll just have to take our chances." "You got no chances," Chet said. But he was not genuinely

belligerent now. He was merely playing out a role, winding up a performance. "It's twenty minutes to eleven," Edgar Bates said. "Those bank people aren't going to work all night. We'd better get going." Tucker saw the watchmen exchange a curious glance at the mention of "bank people," but he supposed they were so dull-witted that they were only now realizing what was to be robbed. "Come on," he said, leading Meyers and Bates out of the storage room. Frank remained behind in the east corridor to watch over the doors through which they would shortly leave Oceanview Plaza and to see that the watchmen remained out of action. Tucker and Bates hurried quietly up the hall, past Surf and Subsurface, past the Rolls Royce salesroom, the bar . . . In the mall lounge the fountain was still splashing, dancing on the surface of the deep pool. Evidently the water was turned off by a set of controls in the warehouse—controls that Chet and Artie had not had the opportunity to use. That was good. The splashing water covered any unintentional noise they might make. Standing by the fountain, Tucker could look down each of the other three corridors, which were well lighted and deserted. At the end of each hall the glass doors were shut. Inside the mall, three feet behind each set of those glass doors, steel-bar gates had been rolled out of the ceiling and locked into baseboard bolt holes. No one could come in or go out of those three entrances. "It's just like Frank described it, down to every detail," Bates said. "I'm feeling better by the minute." Tucker thought of the plain dark wood door and the mall's business office that lay behind it, thought of that single detail that had not been on Meyers's diagram. . . . Then he shrugged off the unwarranted feeling that something was not altogether right. It was useless to worry until something went wrong. And nothing was going to go wrong. The whole operation was going to tick along like a clockwork mechanism. They turned left from the lounge and the fountain and entered the south corridor of the mall. On their right was the House of Books and Sasbury's, one of the building's two largest clothing stores. On the left was Young Maiden, Harold Leonardo Furriers, Accent Jewelry, and finally the Countryside Savings and Loan Company where most of the stores deposited their daily cash intake and where shoppers kept personal checking accounts against the times when they had overcharged their store credits. Having learned from experience that the bold approach was almost always the best, Tucker and Bates intended to walk right up to the bank and take it over, subdue the late-working manager and his assistant without any skulking around. But it was not going to be that easy. The sliding glass panels that fronted the bank were closed and locked. Inside, the darkness was relieved only by two blue night lamps above the vault door and immediately behind the short row of tellers' cages. No manager or assistant manager was diligently toiling away after hours. The bank was deserted. "Christ," Bates said miserably. "They probably work late every Wednesday night, month in and month out—until tonight." Tucker pressed his face to the glass and carefully examined the unlighted room beyond. There was definitely not anyone in there. Meyers had said that the front doors would be open and that maybe even the vault itself would be standing wide. He had said there would be only two meek bank officers to be dealt with. And here it was, empty, closed up tight. "You'll have to do it the hard way, Edgar." "Blow this safe as well as the one at the jewelry store." "And circumvent two sets of alarms." "I thought this might be, for once, an easy job," the old jugger said, obviously delighted that the challenge was greater than he had anticipated. He was in his element. He was no longer nervous. Putting down his satchel, slipping on the pair of thin cotton gloves, he peered at the glass panels where they joined, studied this transparent barrier that separated them from the bank. "I'll bet there's an alarm in these, too." "You shouldn't have to worry about that," Tucker said. "Oh?" "Either Chet or Artie will have the keys." "To the bank?" "They'd have to have keys in case a fire started in one of the stores." Tucker grinned at the jugger's sudden frown. "Don't worry, Edgar. They won't have the vault combination. You'll still have plenty of work to do." Bates blushed. "Well, I was merely—" Off in another part of the mall five shots were fired in rapid succession.

When Tucker ran out of the south corridor and into the public lounge under the peaked ceiling, he saw that Frank Meyers was not down at the east exit where he was supposed to be. The hall was empty. Tucker knew at once where to look: at the opposite end of the building from the warehouse and the two disabled watchmen—at that one room Meyers had left out of the diagram. He ran past the fountain into the west corridor. He passed Henry's Gaslight Restaurant, the House of Books, a clothing store for teen-agers, a shoe importer, a florist, Craftwell Gifts . . . Breathing hard, his heart pounding like a sledge on an anvil, he slid to a stop outside of the half-open door of the mall's business office. "Frank?" He stood warily out of the line of fire but covered the doorway with his Skorpion. "In here," the familiar hoarse voice answered. "What's wrong?" "It's over." "You okay?" "Yeah." Meyers sounded in the best of spirits as he ap-proached the door on the other side and pulled it open. "It's finished. Come in." "You bastard," Tucker said. "This was planned, wasn't it? You were after someone, weren't you?" Meyers grinned. "And I got him." Confused and angry, Tucker pushed past him into the room. This was the outer office, a reception area. The walls were cream-colored, the carpet a deep forest green, the furni-ture all dark and heavy and vaguely Mediterranean. Three good oil paintings caught his eye, held it for a moment. In the center of the room an extremely pretty young woman sat behind an enormous desk. She was in her late twenties, with a dusky Italian complexion and thick black hair that fell to her shoulders. She was terrified. Her brown eyes were open wide. She was sitting as stiff as a statue. Her hands were on the blotter in front of her where Meyers had probably told her to keep them, and the long fingers were knotted like trysting worms, the knuckles white. "Who's she?" Tucker asked. "His secretary," Meyers said. "Whose secretary?" Meyers pointed at the open door to the inner office. Tucker went in and looked at the dead men. One of them was on the floor to the right of the desk, the focal point of a widening pool of blood. In his hand he had a gun he had not used, and he looked like the bodyguard type. Another dead man was sitting in a swivel chair behind the desk. He was about fifty years old, thickset and ugly. He had two holes in his chest and one in his neck, and he was grinning at Tucker. Tucker felt sick. He wanted to turn and cut Meyers down as the big man had done with these two. But he was incapa-ble of that, just as he would have been incapable of the senseless murders Meyers had just committed. He turned away from the carnage, for he could not look at a dead man without suffering intimations of his own mortality. Facing Meyers, struggling to keep his anger and disgust in check, he said, "Who was he?" "Rudolph Keski," Meyers said. "The other one was his protection. Some protection." He laughed. Tucker winced. "Why did you want him?" Tucker's voice was low and cold. No one should have had to die. "Keski gave me this voice," Meyers said. "He put me in the hospital for months." For the first time he realized that Tucker didn't take killing quite so lightly as he did. Now Meyers was trying to justify himself. "Mafia?" Tucker asked. Meyers was amused by that. "Hell, no." "Our friend in Harrisburg said you got mixed up with Sicilians." "That's just a rumor, then," Meyers said. "Keski headed the local organization. But he was Polish, not Mafia. There's no connection between him and any national group. He wasn't exactly small time, but he wasn't big, either." "Why didn't you tell me about him?" Tucker asked. "You wouldn't have thrown in with me," Meyers said. He was smiling jauntily. The personality change that had oc-curred between New York and Los Angeles was now firmly established. "No one would have come in on the job. . . . So I said it was just robbery—which it still is, by the way." "I'll want to hear the whole story. Later." He looked at the woman, tried to smile even though he was frightened and sickened by the slaughter. "You okay?" "I didn't touch her," Meyers said. "You okay?" Tucker asked again, ignoring Meyers. She nodded, tried to speak, could not. She made a little croaking noise and twisted her fingers together even tighter than they had been. "Don't worry," Tucker assured her, striving for a calm and gentle voice. "You won't be hurt." She looked at him as if she were deaf and dumb. "You really won't," he said. "You'll have to come with us to the storage room and

let us tie you up. But we won't hurt you." "He killed Mr. Keski," she said. Her voice was low, sultry, delightful. It was out of place in this morgue. "I know he did," Tucker said, going over to her and prying her hands apart. He held her right hand as tenderly as if they were lovers. "But that was something between him and Keski. It had nothing to do with you. Right now, all he cares about, all I care about, is taking some money out of the bank safe up the hall. We'll have to tie you up while we do that. You understand?" Her hand was cold and motionless in his. "You understand?" "Yes." "Good," Tucker said. He let go of her hand and walked around behind her and pulled back her chair as she got up. "Don't try to run. There's nowhere to go. Just cooperate and you won't get hurt. Under—" He stopped talking when she stepped away from the big desk, and he moved in closer to it, bending down to look into the cavity beneath the work surface. What he thought he had seen turned out to be no illusion, no trick of shadows, no stain on the carpet. It was there. "Christ!" "What?" Meyers asked. "You stupid ox," Tucker said. In the knee hole under-neath the desk the green carpet had been cut away in a neat circle and molded down with metal tacking strips. In the center of that cleared space there was a small rectangular foot pedal, like a miniaturized automobile accelerator. "It's a pump-action alarm pedal," Tucker said. He stood up and looked at the woman. He felt like a wire being drawn tighter and tighter between two winches. "Did you use it?" She backed away from him and came up against the wall, bumping her head on an oil painting in a rococo frame. "Did you use it?" he repeated. "Don't kill me." "We aren't going to kill you," Tucker said. "Please . . ." Her eyes were wide again. All the blood had drained out of her lovely face. Beneath that natural olive complexion she was pale. Tucker went over to her and took her hand again, held it to his lips, kissed her fingers. She looked at him as if he were mad. "I know how scared you are. I'm extremely sorry that this had to happen." She blinked at him, and he thought there was a growing blank spot behind her eyes. Shock was catching up with her fast. "What's your name?" he asked, quickly trying to establish some rapport with her. "What?" "Your name. What is your name?" Seconds might be precious if the cops were on the way, but patience was the only way to get through to her right now. She was stunned half out of her senses. If he had been in her shoes when Meyers opened up on Keski, Tucker knew he would be no better. "I'm Evelyn Ledderson," she replied, as if her own name were entirely foreign to her, as if those few syllables made no sense whatsoever. "Evelyn," Tucker said, his voice so soft that Meyers had trouble hearing him clearly, "do you understand that we don't want to hurt you? We have nothing to gain by hurting you. Just tell me . . . That alarm pedal under your desk must connect to a light board in a police station somewhere nearby." He was amazed at the reasonable, calm tone of his own voice. Inside, he was screaming and running around in circles. "We have to know, Evelyn. . . . Did you use that pedal?" She looked into his eyes and seemed suddenly calmed by them, as if she read his sincerity like a large-type message on his retina. The fear was still in her, but it was under control now. It did not paralyze her anymore. "Yes," she said. "You bet I used it. I pumped the hell out of it." Tucker looked at Meyers. "Let's get out of here," the big man said, his good mood shattered. Tucker grabbed the woman's arm. "You'll have to come along with us," he said, forcing her out of the office behind Meyers. She did not want to go, but she knew that she would only make things worse for herself if she resisted. Kicking off her shoes to keep from stumbling in the built-up heels, she ran along beside him. In the distance there were sirens.

When they entered the east corridor, they saw Edgar Bates down at the far end standing on the left just beyond Surf and Subsurface, across from the warehouse entrance. He had gotten a set of keys from one of the night watchmen, had inserted a key into a slot on the wall, and had activated the steel-bar gate that was recessed in the ceiling. An electric motor hummed loudly. The gate made a lot of noise itself, clattering like tank tread as it descended to block the entire width of the hall. "What are you doing?" Meyers shouted, his ruined voice cracking. Bates turned and looked at them. His face was drawn, his eyes as wide as Evelyn Ledderson's eyes had been when Tucker had first seen her. When they reached him, just as the gate clanked against the terrazzo floor, Bates said, "There's cops in the parking lot." Meyers pushed past him and grabbed hold of the gate, shook it, tried to heave it up out of the way. "You dumb bastard! You'll trap us all in here." Bates laughed without humor, his eyes flat and glassy. "Who's the dumb bastard? Don't you see, Frank? We al-ready are trapped in here." Tucker moved to the gate, pulling the woman along with him. He stared out through the grid of thin steel rods, past the glass outer doors that were only three feet away. One prowler car, made colorless by the ranks of mercury vapor lights out there, was already stopped about five short yards from the mall entrance. What Tucker had told Evelyn Ledderson a few minutes ago now held true for all of them— there was nowhere to run. Abruptly, a second squad car wheeled in beside the first, nearly scraping paint with it, braking so hard that tires squealed and the big Detroit frame rocked back and forth on its springs. "We could shoot our way out," Meyers said. "Forget it," Tucker said. "We have to try." "We'd get about two feet," Tucker said. Edgar Bates was busy fixing the gate to its bolt holes along the baseboard. "We wouldn't even get through those doors," he called over his shoulder. "He's right," Tucker told Meyers. "He did the right thing by sealing this off. We aren't going to get out this way. All we can do is make sure they can't come in, either." "We can't hole up here," Meyers said. "I know that." The specter of failure, linked arm in arm with the image of his father, rose in the back of his mind. Meyers pointed to the gate. "Then what does this really buy us in the end?" "Time," Tucker said. "Time for more prowler cars to get here," Meyers said, making a sour face. "We might come up with something," Tucker insisted as he watched the four cops outside move in toward the glass doors. "Like what?" "We might find another way out." "How?" "I don't know yet." "If we can't leave by this door," Meyers said, "we can't leave by any of them. They'll have the other three covered, too." "I know," Tucker said. "But all the entrances are shut tight from the inside. The loading bays in the warehouse are down and locked. That is everything, right? They can't get in at us." "You keep on about that," Meyers said. "You make it sound like some fantastic advantage. But we can't just sit here and wait them out, for Christ's sake." Two of the policemen tried the outer doors, held their hands over their eyebrows to shield out the glow from the parking-lot lights around them, and peered inside. Still holding the woman where he hoped they could see her, Tucker poked the barrel of his Skorpion through one of the four-inch-square openings in the gate grid, pointed it right at the two cops. Frank Meyers did the same thing. "Move back!" Tucker shouted. "Stay far back!" But they did not need to be told. The moment they saw the guns, they jerked out of the way like puppets pulled back on strings, and they ran to the squad cars where they could take shelter. They were excited, shouting back and forth at one another. Tucker could not quite make out what they were saying. "They won't hold off for long," Meyers said. "You can bet on that. What we should do, we should—" "Shut up," Tucker said. The two words were delivered so sharply, with such anger, that Meyers was surprised into silence. He blinked stupidly, licked his thick lips, and wondered how to respond. Tucker said, "We wouldn't be in this fix if you hadn't gone after Keski. Don't start bitching at me now. Accept the responsibility like a professional, it's your fault and yours alone. You have to face that, and shut the hell up." Meyers cleared his throat, shook his head to express a mixture of dismay, anger, and respect. "You talk pretty damned freely." Tucker glared at him. "That's right." After a short staring match which

Tucker won, Meyers said, "But you got to admit we're in a bad way." "I never said differently." "I don't see what you expect to do." "Look," Edgar Bates said, "we have three hostages here. We can use them for a shield." His voice was thin, quivering. "That's an idea," Meyers said. Evelyn Ledderson went rigid, tried halfheartedly to pull away from Tucker. "You said you wouldn't hurt me. Now you want to hide behind me." "She's right," Tucker said. "It's a bad idea. I've never heard of anyone making good an escape behind hostages. The cops might shoot at us, anyway. These days, they don't always seem to care much about the fate of innocent bystanders. And even if they let us get to the station wagon and leave, they'll just tag along until we let these people go. Then they'll blow the crap out of us." "But what other chance do we have?" Bates asked. "I've got a couple of ideas," Tucker said. "But before we start to talk about that, I want to get to a telephone and call the police. They've got to understand that we do have hostages." "They saw the girl," Bates said. "But maybe they think she's one of us." Meyers wiped his face with the back of a seersucker sleeve. "They know we have the guards." "And maybe they think we killed the guards," Tucker said. He looked at Bates. "Take Evelyn into the warehouse and tie her up with Chet and Artie." Bates picked up his gun, which he had put on the floor by the gate, and he pointed at the woman. "Come along, please." She looked at Tucker. Her face was puckered with doubt. "It's okay," he assured her. "This man won't make a mis-take. He won't hurt you." Reluctantly, warily, she preceded Edgar Bates into the warehouse. The jugger turned as he was about to follow her through the gray door, and he said, "Hey, I left my satchel back up there at the bank. It's got the wire in it. What do I use to tie her up?" "There ought to be some wire on the workshop shelves," Tucker said. "Look around in there." "Oh," Bates said distractedly, as if he were half in a trance. "Yeah. Sure. I should have realized . . ." He went into the warehouse after the woman. "He isn't going to be much good if the situation gets any worse than it is now," Meyers said, looking after the older man. "I have stronger doubts about you," Tucker said pointedly, staring at the big man. Meyers's face reddened. His blue eyes couldn't hold Tucker's darker ones. "Look, I admit I fouled up. I should have known as much about Keski's office as I knew about the rest of the mall. I should have known about that alarm pedal, and—" "Save it for later," Tucker said shortly. "I've got to call the cops before they do anything stupid." He looked past Meyers, out at the two squad cars, the revolving red dome lights, and the very cautious movements of the four police-men hovering around the cars. "You keep a close watch on them. But don't start any shooting." "Of course not." "I mean it." "You can count on me," Meyers said. Tucker smiled ruefully. Sure I can, he thought. Oh, I can really trust old Frank Meyers. He wished he didn't have to turn his back on the big man in order to walk up to the mall lounge. He closed the telephone-booth door, shutting out the worst of the fountain's roar. Though he was rewarded with relative quiet, he now had to endure the clinging odor of a strong perfume that permeated the booth, an almost tangible spirit shed by the last customer. Wrinkling his nose and trying to breathe shallowly, he put a dime in the box and dialed the operator. "Operator," she said, as if he might not have remembered whom he was calling. "I'm at the Oceanview Plaza shopping mall," Tucker said. "I need to contact the police. Do you know which station covers this area? Would you dial them for me, please? It's an emergency." "You want Directory Assistance, sir," she said, sounding as if she had quite accidentally plugged one of her wires into her nostril. "Forget Directory Assistance," he said. "Sir, I cannot help—" "I told you this was an emergency," Tucker said. "There is a robbery in progress here. Get me the police now." She hesitated. "Just a moment, sir." "I don't have a moment." Several seconds passed. Relays clicked in his ear. He could hear a distant conversation between two old women on another crossing line. Relays clicked again. A phone rang at the other end. "Police," a gruff male voice said. "To whom am I speaking?" "Sergeant Brice," the cop said, not pleased that any caller should want to know. People reporting crimes usually didn't want to know the deskman's name. It was the crackpots who liked that touch of

familiarity. Tucker took a deep breath. "Listen carefully to what I'm going to tell you, Sergeant. I won't go over it again. There is a robbery in progress at the Oceanview Plaza shopping mall. You've already got several patrol cars out here." He paused. Then: "I'm one of the thieves who's involved in this thing. I—" "What is this?" Brice demanded. "Are you listening to me?" "What do you mean you're one of the thieves?" "I'm calling you from a public telephone in the mall's lounge," Tucker said. "In the mall?" "That's it. You've got it," Tucker said sarcastically. "I want you to pass on some information to whoever is heading up the police detail out here." "Wait a minute," Brice interrupted. "I'm not going to wait at all," Tucker said. "I'm going to say this quickly, and then I'm going to hang up. If you don't act on it properly, a lot of people are going to die unnecessarily." "You're inside the mall," Brice said. "You're a thief." He was talking mainly to himself, wonderingly. Tucker said, "There are only six ways to get into this mall. We've got every one of them sealed up tight. We have a fortress here. Your people can't force their way in unless they're prepared to die in the process." "You're in real trouble," Brice said threateningly. He was being theatrical now, just as Chet had been. But at least he had caught on and understood that this was no hoax. "Furthermore," Tucker said, "we have hostages. We are holding two night watchmen. We've also got Mr. Rudolph Keski, who apparently owns a piece of this joint. Mr. Keski has asked me to tell you that he hopes you'll deal most diplomatically with this situation." He knew it would be a mistake to tell Brice that Keski was dead. If the police knew that murder had already been done, they wouldn't give the hostages very high odds. They might even try to break in and rescue them. Therefore, Tucker tried to sound like a desperate man—but not like a man without anything to lose. "We have Keski's bodyguard and his very lovely secretary, Evelyn Ledderson. Four men and one woman, Sergeant Brice. If anyone tries to come in here after us, we'll kill all five of them." "You're nuts," Brice said. "You'll never—" Tucker talked right over him. "We're armed with sub-machine guns, and we can do a great deal of damage if we want to. There are seven of us." The exaggeration could not hurt. It might make the police think twice before they tried anything too daring. A band of three thieves was just a few punks—while seven of them was a small army to be respected. "You're going to be sorry you got mixed up in this damned thing," Brice said sternly, like a father admonishing a child. "The best thing for you to do is walk out of there right now before the charges against you get a whole lot worse. Give yourselves up." He seemed to realize the uselessness of continuing along those lines. "What do you want from us?" "Right now," Tucker said, "I'm only asking that your people stay out, leave us alone." "For how long?" "As long as I say." "You'll want safe passage out of there in return for those people you're holding." "Not just yet. But that's an option that I want to keep open. For the next couple of hours, though, let's consider this a stalemate." "You can't last forever." "Long enough." "What in the hell did you want in there? Why get into something as crazy as this?" "We wanted the bank, for one thing," Tucker said. "Maybe we'll still get it." "Wait," Brice said, sensing that Tucker was about to hang up on him. "What's the number of that phone you're using?" "Why?" "We might want to get in touch with you again. Some-thing might come up." In a crisis, Tucker decided, it would be a good idea to have a line open to the other side. He gave Brice the number and hung up before the sergeant could say anything more. When he stepped out of the booth, he heard more sirens approaching over the noise of the fountain.

While Bates stood guard in the east corridor, Tucker led Frank Meyers into the warehouse, past the three hostages, back among the cartons and crates where they could hold a private conversation. Random patches of bright fluorescent light alternated with pools of deep blue shadows. The air was stale and moist here. "I don't see why you need to know everything," Meyers said when Tucker stopped and leaned against a ten-foot-high partition of solid cardboard boxes. "I want to understand exactly what you've dragged me into," Tucker said. "I haven't dragged you into anything." "Murder." "I killed him," Meyers said, trying to dismiss Tucker's apprehension with a rapid back-and-forth movement of his burly head. "You can't be had on that rap." "I can be nailed as an accessory." Meyers did not have an answer for that one. "Now, who was this Rudolph Keski?" "Look, Tucker—" "Who was he?" Meyers was much larger and stronger than Tucker, but Tucker was not the least bit afraid of him. He was so accus-tomed to dealing with his father and his father's henchmen that he could never be frightened of a man who had nothing more than a simple physical advantage. Tucker's father had always been capable of hurting him emotionally and finan-cially as well as physically. Compared to the old man and the old man's high-powered lawyers, bankers, and bought politi-cians, Frank Meyers was no real threat at all. He was minor league in the extreme. He might be dangerous, violent, and cunning, but he could be handled easily enough. Meyers stared at the floor, reluctantly cowed by the strength in Tucker's voice. He made a circle on the concrete with the point of his right shoe, looking pretty much like a sullen child. "Keski was a runner in the New York City rackets about twenty-five years ago," he said, still staring at the floor, unable to face Tucker. "Then he came West and set up something for himself. Started with a bar out here in Santa Monica. There was gambling in the back room. Then he moved into prostitution, set up a stable of girls. From there he went to dope-peddling—grass, hash, pills, even heroin. He wasn't above bank jobs, a payroll hijacking now and then, protection rackets . . ." "How'd you get to know him?" "We were friends in New York. When he started setting up bank jobs out here, he asked me to come in with him. We did four jobs together over the years." "And the last time you worked with him was two and a half years ago," Tucker said. Meyers frowned. "How'd you know that?" "Felton told me." "He had no business—" "I had my doubts about you," Tucker said. "I wanted a lot of answers from Clitus. If he hadn't given me a few of them, I never would have thrown in with you." Wiping his sweat-glazed face with a dirty handkerchief, Meyers said, "The last time Keski used me, it wasn't a rob-bery. It was murder." Tucker waited. He knew that the big man was going to tell all of it now, but at his own speed. There was no way to hurry him along. "For most of the last twenty-five years," Meyers said, "Keski had a partner, a man named Teevers. They split everything down the middle, and they took equal risks. They weren't close, but they didn't hate each other either. About four years ago Keski decided that it was time to put their money into straight, legal businesses. He wanted to drop the more dangerous stuff like drug-dealing, gambling, and the protection rackets. Teever was old-fashioned. He couldn't see it at all. He was dumb enough to think there was more money in crime than in legit business." "And Keski figured the best way to handle the disagree-ment was to have Teevers killed." "Yeah," Meyers said. "Keski called me. Just the two of us were involved. We planned it, set it up. It looked like an accident, even to the police and insurance people. It was perfect." "Keski and you were the only ones who knew the truth," Tucker said. "Beautiful." "Yeah." "You really didn't see what was coming next?" Tucker asked, incredulous. Meyers looked up sheepishly. "I honestly didn't." "Keski tried to kill you." "Almost succeeded." Meyers tried a lopsided grin. It didn't work. "But how?" Tucker asked. "You're so much bigger than he was." "He paid me half in advance," Meyers said, "and was supposed to give me the rest after the job was done. He met me in my hotel room here in L.A. to give me the rest of the money . . . Look, I'd worked with him before. He'd always been square with me. I turned my back on him, never think-ing he might . . . He came in behind me like a cat . . . Reached around and slit my throat . . ." Meyers's whispery

voice grew shallower, haunted. "When someone cuts you like that, you're too busy trying to hold the edges of the tear together to protect yourself from anything else. When I fell, he stomped once on my neck. Nearly crushed my windpipe. Then he walked out and left me for dead." "That was a mistake." "You know it. He hadn't hit my jugular. He'd done badly enough otherwise. But he missed the jugular." He grinned, an expression that worked this time. "Still, you must have bled. You must have—" "I was saved by my weakness," Meyers said. "Weakness?" "I had a woman with me," Meyers said. "I stashed her in the bathroom when Keski knocked on the door. I didn't want her to be a witness to the payoff. The moment Keski left, she came out and saw what he'd done to me, and she called down to the desk for an ambulance. I still might have died. But it turned out that three floors below an ambulance team was picking up an old man who'd had a fatal stroke in another room. They rushed upstairs for me. The old man died, but I pulled through." "And ever since you've wanted Keski." "You know it," Meyers said, petting his Skorpion with one hand as if it were alive. "A year after it happened, I came back out here and rented an apartment. Then I started hunt-ing Keski. I found out that he'd gone straight, just like he'd wanted to do. He'd bought the majority stock in this mall, owned motels and restaurants up and down the coast, a dozen other things. I followed him to his office here in the mall every day for two months, looking for an opening. But he was packing two bodyguards then." "He never saw you?" Tucker asked. "If he did, he wouldn't have recognized me," Meyers said. "I used to be more of a dresser. And I didn't have a crew cut. I even had a mustache. But that got shaved off in the hospi-tal, and I never felt like growing it back." "So while you followed Keski around, you learned the layout of the mall." "I started to see what a beautiful job it was," Meyers said, nodding his bristled head. "I figured I could combine the job with getting Keski. I knew the bastard would be surprised when I walked into his office an hour after closing time and pointed a gun at him. Then, ripping off his mall after I'd fingered him seemed like a real nice touch." "It was Keski who stayed late every Wednesday," Tucker said, "not the bank manager." "Sure." "You lied." "I didn't have a choice." "That doesn't make any difference," Tucker said. "You lied to Felton. You lied to me. If you get out of this, you're finished in the business." "I had to lie to make it sound sweet enough to get you into it," Meyers said earnestly. He saw the anger in Tucker's eyes, a subdued but steady flame. "I was a man on the ropes, Tucker. I could still get up for a job, but between jobs I was a mess. I just sat in that apartment in New York letting myself go to hell thinking about it. I had to get Keski before the whole thing ate me up." He cleared his throat and looked nervously at the smaller man. "You understand that, don't you?" "No." "He nearly killed me. He—" "He was your problem," Tucker said. "Not mine or Edgar's." "Hey, look," Meyers said. "Whether or not the manager is here, that bank can be knocked over." "Could have been," Tucker said, stressing each word. "But you overlooked that alarm pedal beneath Ledderson's desk . . ." "Christ, what a mess!" Meyers said, as if he had, for most of their conversation, forgotten that they were in a bind, that carloads of police now surrounded Oceanview Plaza. Gaining his revenge, killing Rudolph Keski, Frank Meyers had not regained his old common sense and self-control. His wit and his nerves would never be what they had been before Keski had slit his throat. He was still a ruined man, operating on the remembrance of courage. "We should have shot our way out while we had the chance." "It's too late for that now," Tucker said. "I know. If you'd let me—" "And I think I may have come up with something better," Tucker said, stepping away from the wall of boxes, straighten-ing his coat with a quick shrug of his shoulders. "You see what's right there beside you?" Meyers turned right and left, perplexed. "On the floor," Tucker said. Meyers looked down, saw it, was still perplexed. "It's a drain, that's all." Tucker knelt beside a drainage grill that had a diameter half again as large as that of the standard manhole. "Outside, behind the mall, there are some pretty steep hills, nothing on them. When it rains, a great deal of water must collect on the parking lot. They'll have a system of storm drains to cope with it." "So what?" Meyers knelt down too. "A storm drain

is usually pretty large," Tucker said thoughtfully. He stared into the tunnel below, through the holes in the heavy grilled cover. Beyond the metal grid there was only darkness, deep and velvety and black as a starless sky. "It's designed to convey huge volumes of water for short periods of time. It ought to be big enough for us to crawl through." Meyers dug a finger in his ear as if he thought he had not heard Tucker properly. "Are you serious?" "It might work." "Go out through a sewer?" "It isn't a sewer," Tucker said impatiently. "It only carries fresh rain water. Right now it ought to be dry—or nearly so." "But if we went down there," Meyers said, "where would we come out?" Clearly, he did not relish the idea of using the storm drains for a getaway. "I don't know," Tucker admitted. "But I'm sure as hell going to find out." He put his gun aside. "Here. Help me get this grill out of the way." He got to his feet and laced his fingers through the steel grid. Unhappily, Meyers put his own Skorpion beside Tucker's, stood up, bent over, and grabbed the other side of the grill. Between them they lifted it out of its hole, walked it across the floor, and set it down a few feet away. Tucker went back and knelt by the hole again. "I still can't see anything. Go over to the workbenches and get one of the flashlights." Meyers picked up his Skorpion, holding it in both hands for a moment. "Anything else?" "Maybe you should look out in the hall and see if every-thing's okay with Edgar." "Should I tell him about this?" Meyers asked, gesturing toward the hole in the floor. Tucker raised his head. "Yeah. Maybe that wouldn't be a bad idea. Even if it leads nowhere, it might cheer him up for a few minutes. He's probably feeling low right now." "So am I," Meyers said. "Sure," Tucker said. "We all are."

Tucker sat on the edge of the drain opening, then jumped down into the darkness, landing feet first on the corrugated steel floor. He switched on the flashlight that Meyers had brought him, and he discovered that the pipe was larger than he had expected it would be, nearly high enough to allow him to stand upright, wide enough so that neither shoulder touched it. "What do you think?" Frank Meyers asked. He was kneeling on the warehouse floor overhead, peering down through the circular entrance to the drain. "Maybe we're on to something," Tucker said. He directed the wide yellow beam of the flashlight over the walls. The tunnel was dirty, a bit rusted, and spotted with luminescent gray-green moss. Spiderwebs filled the shallow troughs between a few of the ripples in the steel. Centipedes clung to the metal ribs, long eyestalks flicking nervously up and down; and when the light touched them, they fled into the shadows. Though the walls were generally dry, the floor of the tube was puddled with filthy water. He was standing in an inch or two of dark, brackish sludge that gleamed like oil in the amber light. "Want me to come down?" Meyers asked. "Not just yet." "I'll wait here for you." "Do that." Tucker held the flashlight out in front of himself, looked first south and then north. In both directions the tunnel bored away into unrelieved darkness, an artery in the earth. Tucker remembered that to the south there was no parking lot, and there the well-maintained mall property gave way to abrupt and ragged hills, rock formations, sun-bleached scrub, widely scattered palm trees, and ugly erosion gullies like dozens of dry stream beds. There the land fell sharply away to the main road and then down to the sea. If the storm drains emptied anywhere, they would pour forth into that chaotic jumble of useless land. He turned south and started walking, stooping just enough to keep from striking his head on the ceiling. His footsteps rang on the metal floor, echoed in front and behind him. When he had to splash through a puddle, the noise was amplified until it sounded like the incessant roar of the giant fountain out in the mall's public lounge. The air was stale but not unpleasant, like that in a closet full of old clothes. And if it led to the fresher air of freedom, then it was quite easily endured. Ahead the tunnel angled to the left. When Tucker turned the corner, the tainted air was freshened by a cool night breeze, and he knew that he was suddenly close to the end of the drainage system's main run. He switched off the flashlight at once, stood dead still until his eyes could adjust to the intense darkness. Gradually he was able to discern an area of lesser darkness perhaps fifty or sixty feet ahead, an ethereal, shimmering circle of extremely dim gray light that contrasted with the pitch-black tunnel walls, caught the eye and held it like a far-off beacon. Cautiously he went forward again, making as little noise as possible. At the mouth of the drain, which opened at the brink of an erosion gully six feet above the ground, he stopped and hunkered down. He tried to press against one wall and make a smaller target of himself, though he was painfully aware of how bullets would ricochet off the rippled steel all around him. . . . He stared out at the shadow-cloaked hills, down the rugged slope toward the intruding night sea. Only two things moved out there: a thick cloud covering that drifted eastward from the ocean and a steady stream of automobiles on the main highway a hundred yards below. Then, arising suddenly, there were voices. Tucker stiffened. A hundred feet downslope two flashlight beams appeared at the edge of the gully. Tucker checked to be certain that the Skorpion was fully loaded. It was, of course. Behind the flashlights three cops came into sight. They stood on the bank of the narrowly eroded channel looking upslope toward the mouth of the drain where Tucker sheltered. Apparently they could not penetrate the darkness in the tunnel well enough to see him, for they made no effort to protect themselves or to conceal their movements. Instead they clambered noisily down the side of the gully, slipping and stumbling into the dry stream bed where they took up positions behind a series of weathered boulders not seventy feet from the drain pipe. At almost the same instant, the two flashlights winked out. The night fell back in like a collapsing roof. Carefully, quietly unfolding the wire stock of the Skorpion, Tucker locked it into place in its extended form. Now he could use the pistol as a

submachine gun if the cops came up the gully and tried to gain entrance to the mall through the drain tunnel. He ardently hoped they would stay where they were right now. Their voices still carried through the night on the gentle sea breeze, but Tucker could not quite make out what they were saying. Several minutes passed as their conversation grew less boisterous and finally settled down to a constant murmur well beyond his understanding. Cars continued to streak by on the highway. In endless masses the gray-black clouds, like giant ships, came in from the sea. Without wanting to, Tucker thought about Elise. He conjured up a vivid mental image of her face and sleek body, thought of the way she walked and talked, the many ways they joked together and made love and shared their lives . . . He felt weak in his guts, cold and tired and terribly lonely. Losing Elise, he would be losing nearly everything that mattered most to him, a truth he had not often admitted to himself. For all his cool sophistication, for all their talk about wanting to be able to go their separate ways, they needed each other. And he needed her more, perhaps, than she needed him. When he contemplated the loss of her, the taste of that emptiness to come could almost paralyze him. . . . Which was no good at all. He was not yet beaten, not if he got up and moved and tried. In fourteen other jobs he had made a name for himself, had proved the worth of the "Tucker" pseudonym. He was more proud of his false identity than of his real one. This was no time to throw all that away and let his life fall apart. He would get out of this somehow. On the highway below a symphony of horns sounded and brakes squealed; the traffic flow went on. After Tucker had watched the boulders and had listened to the three cops for almost five minutes, he was fairly sure they did not intend to come any farther. They were merely covering the drain to prevent anyone from escaping through it. Tucker smiled grimly. Whoever was in charge of this police operation was a shrewd and dangerous man, someone who thought of the unlikely and prepared for even the improbable. But it doesn't matter, Tucker thought, by way of an internal pep talk. Whoever the bastard is, he can be beaten. Everyone can be beaten, no matter how tough or smart he is. "Except me," he said softly, as an afterthought. He laughed quietly at himself, and that made him feel much better than the pep talk had done. He got up and turned, stretched as best he could to get the kinks out of his legs and back. Then he walked north, the way he had come, not daring to switch on his flashlight until he was a good twenty steps past the bend in the pipe and back in the stale air of the main drainage line. Frank Meyers was waiting for him at the hole in the warehouse floor, his harsh face peering anxiously down into the lightless pipe. "I was getting worried." "No need," Tucker said, handing up the flashlight and then his Skorpion. "Does it lead out?" Meyers asked. "Help me up," Tucker said. The big man put out a hand. Tucker grabbed it, struggled up, pulled himself over the edge of the hole, and flopped on the cement floor. "Does it lead out?" Meyers asked again. "Yeah." "We can use it then?" "No," Tucker said, catching his breath. "They thought of it, too. They put three men on it." Meyers's face twisted into a hideous mask of anger, hatred, and frustration. "Shit!" "My sentiments exactly." "Now, what can we do to—" Meyers was interrupted by Edgar Bates. The old jugger stepped through the door from the east hall where he was standing guard, and he shouted across the warehouse for Tucker. "One of the telephones is ringing out in the lounge!" "The cops?" Meyers asked. Tucker nodded and got to his feet. "It'll be for me."

Lieutenant Norman Kluger, the officer who, thirty minutes ago, had been put in charge of the police response to the crisis at Oceanview Plaza shopping mall, was pleased to be given full responsibility for the problem. He knew that his immediate superior on the night shift had passed the buck on this one, had tried to step out from under a job that was potentially both politically and physically dangerous. Certainly, people were likely to be killed before the night was out, cops and robbers together. And perhaps thousands of dollars of property damage would result in and around the classy mall building. In the morning there might well be a great deal of bad press for the police and the way they handled those hoodlums in there. But Kluger did not care to think about any of that. He had come a long way on the force in a relatively short time, gaining promotions precisely because he was willing to take chances and to jump into the middle of the ugliest situations. He had his eye set on the department head's chair, and he meant to be sitting there by the time he was forty, thereby becoming the youngest chief in the history of the force. And, he was confident, one of the best in its history, too. Kluger stood in a telephone booth on the raised platform of the mall's automated drive-up post office in the northeast corner of the parking lot. The phone box was at his left shoulder. On his right, beyond the booth, lay the large square housing for the stamp dispensers, scales, and mail-boxes. Straight ahead, visible through the clear Plexiglas wall, was Oceanview Plaza and many of the twenty patrolmen for whom Kluger was now responsible. He watched his men, and he listened to the telephone ringing and ringing and ringing on the other end of the line. . . . Thirty-five years old and looking even a couple of years younger than that, Norman Kluger nonetheless had an undeniable air of authority about him. He was six-feet-three, trim and muscular, with long arms and hands fit for a basketball star. His face was square and unlined, but hard and cold as ice. He had a Ronald Reagan jaw, and he knew it. He thrust it out as consciously and effectively as Reagan always did. His eyes were dark and quick, deeply shelved under a broad forehead that bore the only wrinkles in his face. Fortunately, his red-brown hair had already begun to turn gray at the temples; and it was this touch more than his size or his clenched jaw that made him look old enough and experienced enough for command. In the mall the phone stopped ringing. A quiet, steady voice said, "Hello?" "My name is Kluger," the lieutenant said. "I'm in charge of the police out here." "So?" "So," Kluger said, trying to conceal his irritation, "I want to know what you're going to do next." "That depends on you," the stranger said. "Oh?" "Yes. It depends on whether or not you act intelligently. If you pull any crazy heroics on us, try to force the issue—well, that wouldn't be at all intelligent." The lieutenant frowned. His heavy rust-colored eyebrows came together, forming one dark bar across the base of his brow. He had expected to hear a well-struck note of desperation in the man's voice. After all, this stranger and his hoodlum friends were trapped in there like snakes in a bag. But this one sounded unfrightened, almost serene. "Sergeant Brice tells me you have hostages." "Five of them," the man said. "Then you're going to want to use them." "I doubt it." "As long as you have them, we'll have to let you go," Kluger said. "We won't have a choice. We don't want any innocent parties killed or hurt." "Bullshit," the man on the phone said. "If we tried to use them as a shield, and if you thought you saw an opening, there would be gun play. You'd count on marksmanship and luck to miss the hostages. And if you killed any of them, you'd do your best to pin their deaths on us. We wouldn't be alive to argue." That had been approximately what had been going through Kluger's mind for the last twenty minutes. He was unsettled by the stranger's perspicacity. "All we want from you at the moment," the man inside the mall said, "is the same thing that I told Brice earlier: We want you to stay out of here. Back off and stay backed off. Don't try to come in after us." "Oh?" Kluger said. "What are you going to do? How long will you last? Are you going to homestead in there?" The stranger laughed. He had a smooth, mellow laugh, like an actor. Kluger distrusted people who laughed too easily or too well. "At least," the man said, "it's nice to be dealing with a cop who has a sense

of humor."Kluger scowled at his reflection in the Plexiglas before him. "I wasn't being funny, mister," he said sharply, the "mister" delivered in a most military fashion. "I asked you a serious question. How in the hell long do you jerks think you can hide in that place?"The man was silent for a moment, readjusting himself to Kluger's mood. "We'll stay here until we can get safely away. Maybe a few hours—or maybe a few days." "Days?" Kluger didn't think he could have heard him right. "That's what I said." "You're crazy."The stranger said nothing. "You're in a hopeless situation." "Are we?" "You know it," the lieutenant said. "I don't know it," the stranger said. "Currently, it looks as if we can't get out of here without running headlong into you people." "You got it." "But," the stranger continued, "by the same token, you can't come inside without running headlong into us. We may be under siege, but we also happen to be in a fortress. Fortresses are built to withstand sieges. You'd die like flies trying to get through those doors, Kluger. And by the way, you better not send those three men in by the storm drain. They'd just get their heads blown off before they could reach the warehouse."Kluger felt a line of perspiration break out on his forehead. The conversation was not going anything like he had thought it would, was taking quirky turns that left him baffled. "How did you know about them?" "We have a couple of our own men down in the drains," the stranger said. "They saw your fellows enter the gully a couple of minutes before you called."Kluger wanted to strike the booth wall with his fist, but he restrained himself. "One thing I don't believe," he said, changing the subject as best as he could. "There aren't seven of you in there, like you said. No way." "That so?" "With all the lights on, we can look through the doors with binoculars and see pretty much what you're up to. We've only seen three of you. Three, not seven." "And the two in the drain, remember." "Maybe there aren't two in the drain," Kluger said angrily, his face flushed with blood. "Maybe there aren't," the stranger agreed, again confusing and frustrating the lieutenant. "Just don't test us."For a moment there was silence from both ends of the line. Then Kluger said, "I have an offer to make." "Make it, then."The lieutenant spoke evenly, slowly but tensely, straining his Ronald Reagan jaw to the breaking point. "I'll send in two of my men, two unarmed police officers. You'll send the innocent bystanders out and keep my officers as hostages." "No chance." "We aren't going to shoot at our own men!" Kluger insisted impatiently. Why wouldn't this stranger listen to reason? Why wouldn't he fall for anything? What made him so goddamned different from the hundreds of other hood-lums Kluger had handled so well in the past? "Two patrol-men would make a better shield than those five you have now, for God's sake." "I've already said no. Anything else you want?" Sweat was now streaming down Kluger's temples. The cords in his neck stood out like ropes. "Whatever you have in mind, it won't work. You're not up against a bunch of fools. I spent four years in Southeast Asia. Volunteered for it. You're dealing with a veteran, mister." "So are you," the stranger said. Then he laughed and said, "Listen, what's your number there?" "Why?" "Well . . . I might want to ring you up and surrender," the stranger said. Kluger did not answer at once, for he had to calm himself before he was able to speak. "You haven't got a chance now, smartass," he said at last. The stranger laughed again. "Oh, come on, Lieutenant. Give me your number, anyway." Kluger read it off to him. "It's a booth out here in the parking lot. I'll put a man beside it so I'll be sure to know when you call. If you have any brains at all—"The stranger cut him off. The line buzzed in his ear. Kluger turned and slammed the receiver down hard, and the sound cracked like a gunshot in the tiny enclosure. As he turned again and pushed through the folding door, a mosquito bit him on the back of the neck. Cursing, he slapped at it, caught it on his palm, and brought it around to have a look at it. The mosquito was extraordinarily big, red with the lieutenant's blood which it had been drinking. Although it was already dead, he worked it fiercely between his hands—until there was nothing but a brown smear left of it. In Oceanview Plaza's main lounge Michael Tucker pushed open his booth door and stepped out of the stench of French perfume. He went over to the fountain and dipped one

hand into the pool, splashed his face with cool water. It felt good. It ran down his neck and soaked his shirt, and that felt good too. The water flushed away the clinging perfume and the bad odor that he imagined he had picked up from talking to Kluger. Refreshed, he started across the lounge again, toward the entrance to the east corridor, and was brought up short by a sudden, incredible idea. Somewhat numbed by the daring of the plan that had just occurred to him, he walked unhurriedly back to the fountain and sat down on the fake lavaform rocks at the edge of the pool. For some long minutes he stared into the falling water, thinking furiously. When he got up, he was grinning like a fool, though he knew he was most certainly not one. It just might work . . . Meyers and Bates were waiting for him by the gate at the end of the east corridor. "What was the call about?" Meyers asked. Bates said nothing. He was pale and even shakier than he had been earlier. "Wait here a minute," Tucker said. He stepped into the warehouse, smiled at Chet, Artie, and Evelyn Ledderson. "What's going on out there?" Chet demanded. "We're about to rob the bank," Tucker said. "Then we'll make our escape." "Not damned likely," Chet said. Artie said nothing, but the woman disagreed with Chet. She looked at Tucker and said, "He'll do it. He'll get away." Tucker winked at her. Although she met his gaze frankly and studied him with icy interest, she made no response. He searched for and found the panel of switches that controlled the mall lights. He was able to decipher the abbreviations beneath the toggles in fairly short order, and he doused two of the three overhead fluorescent strips in each of the mall's four main corridors. When he went back out and pulled the warehouse door shut behind him, he told Meyers and Bates why they were going to have to make do with minimal illumination. "This Kluger is too damned clever. And if he's able to keep watch on us, he'll soon decide there are only three of us. When he's sure of that, he might try to force his way through one of the entrances." "But we have hostages!" Bates said. "Kluger is the hard-nosed type," Tucker said, remembering the humorless man to whom he had spoken, the low voice like flint striking sparks on flint. "He doesn't give a damn who stands in his way." "Surely he wouldn't kill hostages," Bates said. "And one of them a woman!" "He'd try not to," Tucker said. "And if he accidentally did kill them, he'd still come out of it with another promotion. He's that type." "If he comes in here, he loses a lot of men," Meyers said, brandishing his Skorpion. "If he comes in here," Tucker corrected, "it won't matter. Because, my friends, we won't be here." Bates and Meyers stared at him uncomprehendingly, like a couple of straightmen who had been set up for the punch line. Then the juggler blinked and cleared his throat and said, "You've come up with something, haven't you?" He was still pale and shaky, but now he was smiling. "You found a way out?" Meyers asked. "A way out," Tucker said, not without some theatricality. "But not exactly a way out." Meyers and Bates glanced at each other. "Yes," Tucker said, "that's the best way to describe it— just like a line from Alice in Wonderland. It's a way out, to be sure—but not exactly a way out." "What is this?" Meyers asked. "Riddle time?" He half believed that Tucker was on to something, but he also half believed that Tucker was out of his mind. "Best of all," Tucker said, "we can go ahead and knock over the bank and the jewelry store." "We can?" Edgar asked. In the darker hall the red lights from the police cars that were parked outside shone brighter than they had when all three of the fluorescent strips had been turned on, and they gave everything an eerie, bloody hue. . . . "We can take the money and the stones," Tucker said. "You're serious," Meyers said, moving up close to Tucker and staring into his eyes. "Sure." Meyers grinned hesitantly, then more surely, then as broadly as he could. "You sonofabitch, you really mean it!" Meyers laughed and slapped him on the shoulder. Bates laughed, too, but more nervously. "Tell us about it, for God's sake." Tucker told them.

The door of the Countryside Savings and Loan Company's main vault measured eight-feet-four by six-feet-two and was, -in Edgar Bates's professional judgment, at least nine but no more than twelve inches thick. It was constructed of from twenty-eight to fifty-four layers of highly shock- and heat-resistant steel alloy, set as flush with the wall as could be done, and it had beveled seams that were half an inch deep and an inch wide where it was joined to its steel frame. On the top, bottom, and right-hand side these seams had been filled tightly with a contiguous charge of gelignite, a grayish plastic explosive that resembled carpenter's putty, although it was a good deal more rubbery and more cohesive than putty. On the right-hand side, where the door and the frame joined, there were three massive hinges as large as auto-mobile shock absorbers, each twelve inches long and four inches in diameter. These were protected from assault by heavy blue steel casings that had been shaped to the hinge cylinders and then riveted shut when the door was hung in place. Edgar Bates had carefully molded six ounces of gelignite to each of these hinge casings. "One of the finest vaults made," Edgar said as he worked. He was flushed and happy. "Pekins and Boulder Company of Ashland, Ohio. They're always a challenge." Tucker was kneeling on the floor on the other side of Bates's open satchel, in front of the vault door. "Has one of their safes ever stumped you?" he asked the older man. Bates was disgruntled by the question, and he made no effort to conceal his irritation. "Hell, no. Of course not. You know how good I am." Tucker smiled. "Sorry I asked." "I've knocked down and split open maybe thirty of them over the years. Not a bit of trouble any time. They're always a lot of fun, though." The safe's hatchlike opening handle, a wheel with a two-foot diameter, the design for which had been borrowed straight from the watertight doors in submarines, was also packed with gelignite at every jointure. It was most likely affixed too smoothly and too seamlessly to the main body of the door to be easily blown loose. However, there was no harm in trying. Bates had chiseled away the manual combination dial above the wheel, had removed the guardian plate that was soldered beneath it, and had squeezed several ounces of gelignite into the vault door's primary mechanisms. This lump of explosives had been tied to that around the wheel and to that which was molded in the door's seams by a thick gray thread of itself. Consulting his wristwatch, Tucker said, "It's five minutes of one. You about finished?" "Done," Bates said, getting to his feet and quickly massaging his tension-knotted thighs. Again, he might have been a Russian peasant working out the kinks in his muscles after a long day in the fields. "Except for the detonator." Tucker rummaged in the satchel, came up with a blasting cap about half as large as a breakfast muffin. He passed this on to Bates, closed the jugger's neatly packed black bag, hefted it, and stood up. After he had examined the cap's battery and timer to be sure they were operable, Bates set the device for a two-minute fuse. The moment he had plugged its two base prongs into the gelignite on one of the hinge casings, he said, "Let's get out of here." They hurried around the desks behind the tellers' cages and went through a half gate into the bank's lobby. Out in the south corridor they ran sixty or seventy feet to a stone planter and stooped beside it, waiting for the explosion. Tucker handed Bates the set of master keys he had taken from Chet, the night watchman. "As soon as it's clear that the safe is finished, you can go for the jewelry store. I'll clean out the cash in the bank and join you later. We don't have any time to lose." "We're doing okay," Bates said. "We—" The blast was like a muffled crack of thunder. The glass front of the bank shattered and was pushed out across the corridor in a wave of sparkling fragments. Smoke, like sea foam, rushed out behind the glass, roiled up. An alarm began banging away inside the bank. At police headquarters another alarm would also be sounding. "Let's go," Tucker said. Glass crunching under their feet, they pushed into the savings and loan company's lobby, fanned away the acrid smoke with their arms. The vault door had been ripped from its two highest hinges and was hanging loosely from the third. The wheel was smashed, and the lock mechanism was a mass of jagged metal splinters. The plaster around the vault entrance was broken and charred,

but no fire had been started. "Beautiful," Bates said with more than a little pride. Tucker choked on the foul air, wiped at his teary eyes. "It looks good," he agreed. "It looks perfect." "You go hit the jewelry store." Whistling despite the corditelike stench in the air, Bates turned and disappeared down the corridor. Tucker went back behind the tellers' cages to the breached vault, wishing he could somehow silence the strident alarm bells. But that would take time. And right now they needed every minute they could get if they were to bring off what they had planned before Kluger came charging in and stopped them. He stepped into the vault, past the multilayered door that the gelignite had begun to peel apart like the many crusts of a good Danish pastry. Inside he found an accordion gate separating him from the money. He raised his Skorpion, put the muzzle close to the gate lock, and shot away the heavy latch. The barrier slid back easily after that. In the corner stood a mahogany rack that held canvas money sacks labeled contryside savings. Tucker took two of these and began to fill them with the well-bundled stacks of bills that blossomed everywhere on the shelves and on the counters and in the drawers of the inner vault. Ten minutes later, when he joined Edgar Bates at the rear of the jewelry store next door, he found that the older man was still whistling merrily. "How's it going here?" Bates smiled broadly, whistled the last bars of the tune he was on, and said, "After the Pekins and Boulder beauty, this one is a cinch." "You're a marvel." "I know." "How long?" "Another couple of minutes." "Accent Jewelry's safe was not so large as the bank's vault had been, but it was a walk-in model and appeared to be quite formidable. For nearly anyone else but Edgar Bates, Tucker supposed, it would have been a major job." "You got the money?" Bates asked as he examined and primed the electric fuse. "All but the change." "How much?" "I didn't take time to count it." "Make a guess." Tucker indicated the two gray canvas sacks. "Well, it seems to be more than I first thought." Bates raised his white eyebrows. "Really? Better than a hundred thousand?" "Maybe twice that." "Ahhh," Bates said, finishing with the cap and plugging it into the gelignite. They went out into the corridor again and waited for the explosion, which, when it came, was only half as violent as the first one had been. The store windows shattered outward across the hall. Another alarm began to go bong bong bong, and smoke rolled out of the broken shop front, "Wonderful," Bates said. They went inside to get the stones. On three walls the jewelry store vault was lined with row after row of metal drawers, hundreds of them from the floor to within a foot of the ceiling. Each drawer pulled out about twenty inches, but each was only three inches deep. In every drawer there was a single layer of gems neatly arranged on sheets of dark blue velvet, ranked according to quality, size, and color. "There must be a couple of thousand stones here," Bates said. "It looks like we hit the jackpot again." They began pulling drawers out of the wall and emptying them into the two bags that already contained the cash. They did not bother to keep the diamonds, emeralds, rubies, and other gems separated. They had no time for that. Twenty minutes later, while they were dumping the jewels from the last drawers, Frank Meyers came into the vault. "Everything's ready," he told Tucker. Then he walked over and looked into the open sacks at the green bills and the gleaming stones. "Tell me I'm not dreaming." "You're not dreaming," Tucker said. Tucker and Meyers each took a sack and dragged it out of the vault, through the jewelry store, and into the south corridor. Edgar, humming delightedly under his breath, followed with his Skorpion and his satchel full of tools. "Okay . . . As soon as we move Chet, Artie, and Evelyn—" Tucker began, breathing hard between the words. "I already moved them," Meyers interrupted. "You did? How?" "On one of those electric cargo carts in the warehouse," Meyers said. "You saw them." They were walking toward the lounge, and Tucker slowed as they reached it. "You mean you lifted each one onto the cart—" "Then drove the cart across the warehouse, unloaded him near that damned dog, and went back for another one," Meyers finished. "You're even stronger than you look," Tucker said. Meyers laughed. "It wasn't hard. The woman didn't weigh much at all. Artie was cooperative. Chet didn't like the idea, so he got dropped and bruised a few times." Tucker laughed. "Well . . . Then we're just

about ready to go." "It's going to work," Bates said. He was floating along now, elated with his successes, as high as if he had taken drugs. Nothing could depress him for the next few hours. "I hope you're right," Tucker said. They walked down to the end of the east corridor, the alarms ringing wildly behind them and the red glow of police lights pulsing ahead. By the warehouse door they dropped the sacks and the Skorpions. "I'll switch off the rest of the lights and make my tele-phone call," Tucker said. "You two start getting ready." He opened the warehouse door and stepped inside as they went in the opposite direction. At the light-control panel he flicked four switches and turned out the last fluorescent strips in the corridor ceilings. Out there the mall would now be completely darkened. Kluger would be unable to see any-thing. And that was essential.

Lieutenant Norman Kluger was crouching behind an open squad car door twenty feet from the mall's east entrance when the last of the corridor lights went out inside. That didn't surprise him. When he had heard them blow the bank safe and had gotten confirmation from the alarm center at headquarters, he had known they would do something crazy. If they would still try to rob the bank when they had no hope of escaping, they would try anything. Turning out all the lights was only a first step in some cockeyed plan of theirs. Even though the lighting had been previously re-duced, Kluger's men had been able to see shadows moving about in there. Now they could see nothing. With a bit of calculated bravery he knew would not go unnoticed by the other men, he stood up to his full six-feet-three and rubbed the back of his head in consternation. "Now what's that bastard up to?" "They're doing something they don't want us to see," said the young, pudgy patrolman beside him. "You think so?" Kluger asked sarcastically. The rookie, a kid named Muni, blinked and nodded. "Well . . . What else, sir?" he asked, utterly missing the sarcasm. For a while Kluger stood, intently watching the mall entrance. But nothing was happening there. And he was convinced that nothing would happen there until he made it happen. Before long, he and his men would have to move. Putting it short and sweet, as he had learned to do when he commanded men in Nam, they were going to have to storm the building and take it. He was considering all the ways it could be done, was trying to decide which was the best method of operation, when Patrolman Hawbaker—another rookie who was as gangly and clumsy as Muni was pudgy and paradoxically graceful—ran down from the telephone booth to tell him that a call had come through. "It's that guy inside," Hawbaker said, pointing to the mall. His prominent Adam's apple worked rapidly up and down. "He wants to talk to you right away, sir." Kluger followed Hawbaker across the parking lot, through deep shadows and pools of purple light to the automated post office. He pushed into the first telephone booth in a row of three and drew the door shut. Hawbaker looked in at him like a spectator at a zoo watching a caged animal. Opening the door, Kluger said, "Hawbaker, go away." "Sir?" "I said, go away." "Oh," Hawbaker said. He turned and walked a dozen steps and stood facing the mall, his back to Kluger. Shutting the booth door again, Kluger picked up the receiver and said, "Hello?" "Kluger?" "What do you want?" "How are you?" "What?" "Are you feeling okay?" the stranger asked. "What is this?" "I just want to be sure you're not getting jumpy," the man in the mall said. "I'll bet you're under a great deal of pressure to get us out of here." "What of it?" Kluger asked. In point of fact, though, he was under almost no pressure at all except that which he manufactured for himself, that inner pressure that always helped him to excel in police work. Right now, only two newspapers had learned of the situation, and only three reporters and two photographers were on hand. None of them had filed anything with their offices. Very few people knew what was happening. Most of the politicians and other publicity seekers were home in bed. Indeed, even the chief of the department had probably not yet been informed. The chief was a wounded bear when awakened because of a crisis, and he was usually not disturbed until someone had been killed. Therefore, Kluger had another hour and perhaps even a bit longer to get this thing settled his own way, on his own terms, without everyone interfering with his methods. "I just called to tell you to relax," the stranger said. "It's just about all over." "What?" "You can come inside," the stranger said. "Are you serious?" "Wait fifteen minutes," the stranger said. "Then you can come in, and we won't resist you." "You're surrendering?" Kluger asked. It sounded too good to be true, yet he was strangely disappointed to realize that there was not going to be a fight. "Surrendering? Not at all," the man said. "You can come in because we won't be here to stop you." "What?" "We're leaving." "You're what?" Kluger asked, feeling like a broken record but unable to speak intelligently. His mind was racing, trying to find something about the mall that he had overlooked. "We've found a way out, Lieutenant." "Like hell you have." "If you don't believe me," the stranger said, "you will when you come inside fifteen minutes from now." "We have everything covered!" "You missed one thing." "I did not!" Kluger said. His face was a furious shade of red, the

blood pounding visibly in his temples and in his neck. He was straining his jaw muscles so hard that they ached. "Sorry, but you did." "Look, you—" "Remember," the stranger went on, "fifteen minutes. If you come inside one minute sooner, we'll have to kill the hostages." "I don't know what you're up to—" "We're up to escape," the stranger said, laughing. Then he put down his receiver and cut Kluger short just as he had before. The lieutenant slammed open the booth door, nearly breaking it, and went outside. "Sir?" Hawbaker asked, turning toward him. "Shut up!" the lieutenant ordered. "Let me think." Kluger stood by the automated post office, his hands fisted on his hips, and he gave the mall building a thorough going-over. He let his eyes travel along at ground level around the two faces—north and east—that he could see from this vantage point. Two public entrances. Both locked. Two men on the east doors. Three on the north entrance. There were no windows. The only other potential trouble spots were the two big bay doors on the east wall, the truck entrances to the warehouse. But they were also locked; his men had checked them out at the start of this. To leave the mall that way, the men inside would have to make a lot of noise. And Kluger's men would see the doors going up long before anyone could come through them. Kluger had six men covering the bay doors, and he knew there was not going to be trouble there. But where else? He closed his eyes for a moment, trying to recall the way the south and west faces looked. One double-door public entrance on each of those walls. No windows. No loading docks. He had enough men on both places to deal with any attempted breakout. The roof? He looked at the garish, peaked, imitation thatch roof and immediately ruled that out. Even if they could get onto the roof—and Kluger doubted that—where could they go? Nowhere. The storm drains? Kluger had not been among the first men sent out to investigate the cause of the alarm at Oceanview Plaza, and therefore he had not been plunged into this thing unpre-pared. He had been at the station house on a rest break, using his thirty minutes of free time to catch up on a backlog of paperwork. He was there when Sergeant Brice received the first telephone call from that man in the Plaza building, and he was fairly well aware of the nature of the case before he was put in charge of it. When he was assigned to it minutes after the call to Brice, he had sent a man over to the courthouse to dig up the blueprints to the shopping mall, and then he had come straight out here as fast as he could drive. Even before the blueprints had arrived, he had sent three men into the scrub land next to the mall with orders to search for and guard over any large drain openings. That had been good, sound, far-sighted police work. When the prints had come and he had unrolled them on the macadam behind a squad car, he had learned that there was indeed a way out of the mall through the drains: the same one his men were already guarding. That was the only outlet big enough to pass a man. He was certain that he had read the blueprints correctly. Therefore, the drains did not figure in this. . . . What else? Nothing else. What was this threat of escape, then? A ruse of some sort, a trick? A bluff? A fat mosquito buzzed persistently around the lieutenant's head and tried to alight on his left ear. This time he did not kill it. He brushed it away without thinking, without really being aware that he was expending the effort. All over the parking lot the harsh and eerily garbled voices of radio dispatchers were crackling out of ten police-band radios, rising on the night air like ghostly messages from another world. They came to Lieutenant Kluger, but he did not, at the moment, hear them. His thoughts were else-where, turning over facts, looking for worms underneath them. A bluff, was it? But what could he hope to gain by bluffing? Nothing. Kluger was sure of it. If, in fifteen minutes, the lieutenant did lead a force into the mall, and if those hoodlums were waiting in there, then they would start shooting at one another. A number of policemen would die. That was inevitable. Every battle had its casualties. But in the end, what could the thieves gain? They would be cut to ribbons. Unless they just wanted to go out with a bang. . . . And he was sure that the man he had talked to on the phone was not the type to make a grand-stand play only to see a few fireworks. That man intended to live. A trick? There was no trick, under the circumstances, that amounted to more than

a bluff. He was almost tempted to dismiss it and to go on as he would have done if the stranger had not called with this fairy tale of escape. Yet . . . Something about that man's voice, something about his style and his undeniable self-confidence led Kluger to believe that he had meant precisely what he had said, regardless of the seeming impossibility of it. He had said he and his men were leaving. And if he were telling the truth . . . Kluger looked at his watch. 1:34. He had wasted almost five minutes, and he suddenly realized that they might have been the most precious five minutes of the night. That fifteen-minute waiting period which the man in the mall had demanded was a completely artificial time limit. Kluger was angry with himself for having fallen for it. If they had found a way out, then they would have used it by now. They would have left the five hostages behind and would be unable to reach and harm them. Each minute that Kluger delayed, each minute he stood here on his big flat feet, they might be getting farther and farther away. They might be getting off scot-free. "Hawbaker!" The rookie whirled. "Yes, sir?" "When I came out here, I brought one of the department's acetylene torches to cut through those inner gates if we had to." Hawbaker blinked at him. "It's in the trunk of my car. Get it and bring it to me—on the double!" "Yes, sir." "Don't forget the tank, Hawbaker." "No, sir." Hawbaker was off, running clumsily. Kluger looked at the mall building again, thought of the man on the telephone, thought of the promotions he needed, thought of the chief's chair . . . "Damn!" he said. He ran down toward the east entrance of the mall shouting at his men as he went. "Look sharp! We're going in!"

Kluger grabbed the torch and the feeding hose in one hand, lifted the small tank of compressed gas in the other, and walked across the carpet of broken glass from the outer mall doors that two of his men had smashed with hammers. He was the only one up front now. The others had fallen back on his orders, had gladly taken up safer positions behind the squad cars. In the nine years and six months that he had been a policeman, Norman Kluger had never hesitated to risk his life if the occasion seemed to call for that. He had something of a reputation as a daredevil, but he wasn't like that at all. Naturally, there was a slight bit of grandstanding in it because he often took chances in order to be noticed by those above him in the department. However, for the most part he took risks and bulled his way through dangerous territory, because he did not know how else to get a job done—and because he had long ago decided that he was one of those people who would lead a charmed life, a guy who could walk through a pit of snakes and not be bitten once. He had spent two years in Southeast Asia in the thick of the fighting and had re-upped for two more years when his regular hitch ran out. In all that time he had not suffered a single injury, while all around him were dying, and he eventually came to feel that he could not be hurt. He was charmed, protected, watched over. He also figured that this special personal magic would keep him safe from legal prosecution and forced retirement if anyone ever seriously accused him of overstepping his police-man's authority and tramping too hard on the rights of those people with whom he had to deal. Long before the Nixon Court had begun to rescind the liberal decisions of the past several decades, Norman Kluger had done as he wished with suspects whom he was fairly certain he could prove guilty beyond any reasonable doubt. Sometimes, of course, he had knocked over a few people who were innocent, had bruised those who knowingly or unknowingly got in his way, but by God he had done the job every time. And though there had been grumbling and protests about his methods, no one had ever, in the final analysis, filed or made stick any charge or accusation against him. He was charmed. He was destined, he knew, to move up into the chief's chair in five years. Or perhaps even sooner than that. You just never knew when fortune might smile on you. At the steel-bar gate three feet past the ruined glass doors he put down the tank of gas. He squatted against the wall and, like a soldier putting together his rifle in the dark, hooked the hose to the torch and to the tank's feed valve, working with surprising speed in the dim red light from the police cruisers' rooftop beacons. Beyond him, beyond the gate, the mall's east corridor was absolutely lightless. Three or seven men could have been waiting there for him, machine guns aimed right at his head. Kluger never once looked inside. Breathing evenly, actually thriving on the danger, he took a pair of smoked-glass goggles out of his hip pocket and put them on, then wiped the dark lenses on the back of one shirt sleeve. Clipped loosely to the hose was a pair of silvery asbestos gloves. He put these on, working his big hands in them until they felt comfortable. Switching on the gas flow, he lighted the torch, threw away the match, and adjusted the intense blue-white flame. Then he turned it on the gate next to the left-hand lock bolt, which was an inch up from the carpeted floor. Thousands of molten metal flecks cascaded over the top of the flame and across his gloves, made interesting patterns of red and blue, yellow and white light on his mirrorlike goggles. There was a loud hissing sound like a thousand snakes, and then metal parted before the fire. A section of steel rod clattered out of the gate's pattern, striking rods around it, and bounced noiselessly on the carpet. In a moment Kluger had cut through the grid to the bolt on the inside, and in little more than another minute he had sliced through the lock itself. The carpet smoldered, but it was fireproof and did not burst into flame. He dragged the tank over to the other side and hunkered down and began to work again, sparks lighting his way once more. The second lock was as easy as the first. Hardly more than five minutes after he had started on the first, he finished the second. Turning off the gas flow and instantly killing the bright flame, he stood up and stripped off his fire-spotted gloves, then his goggles, dropped them on the floor, and kicked them out of the way. He shouted over his

shoulder at the squad cars: "Four of you! Come here and help me!" Muni, Hawbaker, and two veteran bulls—Peterson and Haggard—came up quickly and hooked their hands in the gate and put their backs into it, forcing it up into the ceiling far enough for Kluger to slide underneath. Once he was on the other side, he got a grip on the steel bars and relieved Muni, who bellied under the barrier after him. Muni helped hold it up while Haggard came over. In that manner they were shortly all on the inside. "Dark as a shithouse in here," Hawbaker said. "Relax," Peterson said. "If anyone was going to shoot at us, they'd have done it by now." Kluger felt along the wall on his left until he located the warehouse door. Standing to one side, he twisted the knob and threw the door open wide. Light spilled out, but no one opened fire on them. "Hello in there!" the lieutenant called. At once, several excited voices responded, each trying to shout louder than the other, none of them making any sense. "What the hell?" Peterson said. Kluger looked around the corner and saw the workbenches and the jigsaw and the electric-powered fork lifts and the great stacks of boxed and crated merchandise. There was no one in sight. "Two of you come with me," he said. Peterson and Hawbaker followed him, the first dutifully and the second resignedly. The shouting at the far end of the long room grew even louder, more frantic, and considerably less intelligible. Echoing off the high warehouse walls, it sounded like the raving in a lunatic asylum. Moving in between the aisles of stored goods, Kluger said, "Let's go see what we have here." What they had here were three hysterical hostages: the two night watchmen and an extremely attractive young woman in her late twenties. They were bound with wire at wrists and ankles, sitting on the floor and propped against the concrete wall. They stopped shouting as soon as they saw the lieutenant. "Thank God," the woman said. She had large dark eyes and a velvety complexion. She interested Kluger. "Did you get them? Did you nail that little bastard that was in charge?" the largest of the watchmen demanded. "No," Kluger said. "Do you know where they are?" "They didn't get past you, did they?" "No." "Well," the watchman said, "then they're still here some-where." Hawbaker went forward and started to untie the woman while Peterson dealt with this most vocal of the guards. "Don't worry," Kluger said. "We'll get them." He caught a strange look on the young woman's face and turned to her. "You don't think we will?" Her hands suddenly freed, she began to massage her numbed fingers and wrists. They were the most delicate fingers and the slenderest wrists that Norman Kluger had ever seen. "You don't think we'll get them?" he repeated. "No," she answered firmly. She had a warm, appealing voice. "At least you won't get the one who was in charge." "Oh? Why?" "Because," she said, "he's not the sort who'll ever spend a night in jail."

By three o'clock in the morning, an hour and fifteen minutes after Kluger had led the police into Oceanview Plaza, all the search parties had reported back to the lieutenant's command post by the fountain in the mall lounge. They had not found a single trace of the thieves. Officer Peterson and two other men had poked about in all the stores that faced out on the east corridor. They had peered into every nook in Surf and Subsurface and into every cranny in Shen Yang's Orient. At the Rolls dealership they had looked in and under the five gleaming automobiles on display, had pulled up the trunk lids with all the trepidation of men expecting to be shot in the face, and had even lifted the hoods to make sure no one was curled around the engine blocks. In the Toolbox Lounge—a very expensive bar that based its name on the campy decor of giant-sized hammers, screwdrivers, and wrenches that hung on the walls—they pushed flashlights under all the tables and booths, searched behind the bar and in the whiskey storage closet and even in the two large beer coolers. Next door to the bar, in Young Maiden, they thoughtlessly violated the sanctity of a pink-and-buff ladies' powder room and slid back the curtains on all the changing rooms. They went from one end of the mall warehouse to the other, checking the aisles and the side aisles and the cul-de-sacs; indeed, they had actually broken apart a few of the larger crates with the notion that the thieves might have boxed themselves up in order to pass themselves off as merchandise. While Peterson's group was worriedly, frantically darting around in the east end, Officer Haggard and two other men explored the stores along the north corridor. Their greatest challenge was Markwood and Jame, one of the mall's two largest stores, for it was filled with counters and design partitions that provided thousands of possible hiding places; in fact, Haggard's men became so paranoid midway through the search of Markwood and Jame that they all had the feeling that the thieves were slipping around behind them, crawling from one counter to the next and moving always at the periphery of vision. However, they found no one in the store. It was a simple matter, by comparison, to check the changing rooms in Archer's Tailor Shoppe and declare that place clean. Likewise, Gallery Gallery—the mall's rather expensive art gallery—was easily looked into and found empty. Tie and Kerchief offered few places for concealment, and all these were unused. Freskin's Interior Decoration was wildly partitioned into sample rooms, but all of these were quiet and unlivable. "I feel like a kid playing hide-and-seek," one of Haggard's men said, disgusted with the whole affair. "There's a difference," Haggard said. "When you were a kid playing hide-and-seek, there wasn't any chance at all that you could get your brains blown out." Rookies Hawbaker and Muni were working under Officer Shroust over in the west corridor toward the front of the mall. They did not have to prowl through the Plaza's business office, because that was crawling with homicide detectives and technicians from the police laboratory downtown. But they had to check out everything else. They stayed close together and kept their revolvers drawn; Shroust was only seven months away from retirement and did not intend to get killed and be cheated out of his pension, while Patrolmen Hawbaker and Muni were too young to be anything but scared witless. Cautiously they moved through the flower shop and then through Craftwell Gifts, went down to the fancy shoe store and then across to The New Place, a hip clothing store where the prices were decidedly unhip. In the House of Books, where some of the rows of shelves were eight feet high, they had a bad moment when Hawbaker and Muni collided coming out of different aisles and almost shot each other in terror. Henry's Gaslight Restaurant, with its individually partitioned booths and its large kitchen lined with food-storage closets, was the most harrowing part of the stalk, but it, too, proved to be deserted. In the south wing additional lab technicians were at work in the jewelry store and in Countryside Savings and Loan. If anyone were hiding in those two places, one of the police-men would have tripped over him by this time. Therefore, Officer Brandywine and his two men concentrated their search on Sasbury's, the mall's other large clothing-department store. Like Haggard's group in Markwood and Jame, these men became so jumpy that they were looking over their shoulders more than they

were watching where they were going. But they did not find anyone. Tramping on the broken glass that littered most of the corridor, a bit unnerved by the sound of it crunching under their shoes, they went next to Harold Leonardo Furriers and poked around in the cold-storage vaults full of animal pelts. All that was hiding in Harold's was a herd of dead mink. When Officer Peterson, the last search party leader to bring in a negative report, told Lieutenant Kluger that his men had not found a trace of the thieves, the lieutenant thrust out his jaw and began to shout at them. He slammed his fist on the top of the card table that he was using for a desk, and his voice rose until it seemed to drown out the steady susurrations of the fountain behind him. "They have to be here! There is no way they could have gotten out! No way!" Peterson, Haggard, Shroul, Brandywine, and the other men just stared at him, unable to say anything that would please him. "They have to be hiding in here," Kluger said through gritted teeth. "Somewhere in this mall, you've overlooked a hiding space big enough to contain three men." He glared at them, waiting for one of them to dare to disagree. When they remained mute, he said, "Change off. Take different corridors this time. Peterson, you search the north hall. Haggard, go over the ground Shroul covered on the west end; see if you can spot something he missed. Shroul, take the south corridor. Brandywine, you take the east stores and the warehouse." Haggard started to say something to Peterson. "Officer Haggard!" Kluger snapped. "I'd prefer that you did not tell Peterson where you've already searched. Let him start fresh, without preconceptions." Haggard frowned, nodded grudgingly. "Now move," Kluger said. As they were leaving, Evelyn Ledderson arrived. Though it was past three o'clock in the morning, and though she had been through quite an ordeal in the course of the night, she appeared to have showered and applied makeup and started her day only a couple of hours ago. Her short green skirt and ruffled white blouse were wrinkled and smudged, but she was crisp and alert and extremely attractive. "They said you wanted to question me." Kluger smiled. "That's right." He pointed to the folding chair that was set up on the other side of the card table. "Just sit down there and help me tie up a few loose ends. I'm sure we can let you go home shortly." She sat down. "Why do I have to be questioned twice?" Kluger settled into the other chair and folded his hands on the table. "Those other detectives are with homicide. I'm a burglary-and-theft man. So there are sort of two investigations going on at the same time." He felt slightly tongue-tied in her presence. "Go ahead then," she said. "You worked for Mr. Rudolph Keski?" "Yes." "He was the owner of this mall?" "He owned most of it." "What were you—his secretary?" She smiled coldly. "Yes." "Did you often work evenings?" "Only on Wednesday nights," she said, recrossing her slim legs. "Every Wednesday Mr. Keski and his business associates ate an early dinner at Henry's Gaslight." She pointed to the restaurant that faced out on the lounge. "Then they came over to the office and discussed the week's finances until closing time. Mr. Keski and I always stayed another hour or so, attending to the details that had come up during the meeting." "Was that one of his associates in there with him when he was killed?" Kluger asked. "No. That was his bodyguard." "I see." He thought about that for a while, staring unabashedly at her face, slender shoulders, and full breasts. Then he said, "Tell me what happened. How was Keski killed?" She told him, quickly, succinctly. "That was smart work, using that alarm pedal." "It wasn't so smart," she said. "I was terrified." He smiled at her, wondering how he could go about asking for a date. "Then they tied you up in the warehouse?" "Yes." Unconsciously she rubbed her wrists where the wire had encircled them. "I've already talked to the night watchmen," Kluger explained. "I won't waste a lot of time going over old ground." "I am awfully tired," she said. "I appreciate that, Miss Ledderson," he said, smiling and nodding to show her how sympathetic he was. "Or . . . May I call you Evelyn?" She leaned forward seductively, then winked at him and said, "Why don't you just keep on calling me Miss Ledderson?" Her dark eyes bored straight through him and saw much more than he wanted her to know. He colored, looked at his hands, glanced at the spritzing fountain, and felt like a schoolboy caught doing something

filthy. "I understand . . . This must have been difficult for you. I was only trying to be friendly." "I know what you were trying to be," she said. At that moment, when he realized that she was not the sort of woman who could be easily fooled, Kluger lost all interest in her. Women who could hold their own, women who were sharp and perceptive and not afraid to speak their minds never had appealed to him. They offended his sense of tradition, of male-female lightness. He liked the soft and helpless type, the ones who needed support and guidance from sun up to sunset. He didn't want to have to compete with a woman in the bedroom. It never occurred to him, at least not on a conscious level, that he was afraid of losing that competition. His voice had a nasty twist to it now. "You must have known that Rudolph Keski hasn't always been a legitimate businessman." "Oh?" She seemed amused. "He used to be in the rackets." She smiled. "He was in jail, then?" "Nothing was ever proved," Kluger admitted. "Well, then, it's nothing more than hearsay." She sat back in her chair again. She was obviously pleased with Lieutenant Kluger's discomfort. "Did you know about this 'hearsay' reputation of his?" the lieutenant persisted. "If I did know," she said, "what possible difference could it make? It couldn't have anything to do with what happened here tonight." Her voice got hard. There was no longer any amusement in it. "You're angry because I saw through you, and you're just trying to irritate and frighten me. I won't sit here and be harassed much longer." "You'll sit there until I tell you to leave," Kluger said, an ugly edge to his voice. "I'm afraid not." "You will—" "Do you have any serious questions? Or are you completely stumped? If you have anything serious to ask, you'd better ask it right now," she said, pushing back her chair and getting to her feet. Kluger looked down at his hands. They were curled into tight fists. He made an effort to relax. "The manhole cover was off the drain entrance in the warehouse. Do you think they escaped that way?" "I wouldn't know." "First they tied you up and left you on the north side of the warehouse. Then one of them used an electric cart to move you to the south side of the room. Why?" "I guess they were going to be doing something on the north side of the room. Something they didn't want us to see." "Could it be that they were going to leave by the drain and didn't want you to know?" She shrugged. Her full dark hair bounced on her shoulders. "Why would it matter if we knew? We were all tied up. We couldn't do anything about it." Kluger got to his feet because he didn't like to have her staring down at him. "I may want to talk to you again. What's your home phone number and address?" "I gave it to the homicide detective," she said, tilting her head impishly to one side. "I'll need it, too." "You can ask them for it." "I'm asking you for it." "You can reach me here any weekday afternoon," she said, ignoring the implied command. "I'm an employee of the company and not just of Mr. Keski. Even if the new management hires another woman, I'll have to stay on a few weeks to help her get adjusted. I'm convinced you'll have this all wrapped up by then, Lieutenant." She turned and walked off across the lounge, entered the east corridor, and disappeared around the corner. At 3:25, Kluger unfolded the blueprints on the card table and studied them more assiduously than he had before. He found no hidden rooms. No secret passageways. No air ducts. Large enough to hold a man. Nothing. At 3:40, a three-man search party that he had sent into the storm-drain system returned without having found anything worthwhile. So far as they were able to ascertain, the original blueprints were accurate in every detail. The entrances to the storm drain from the parking lot were all much too small to pass a man. There was only one way out: the one that Kluger's men, out in that patch of scrub land, had been covering from almost the start. At 4:00, a representative of the largest local television station came in to bargain for filming permission. He was a short, blocky man who dressed too loud for Kluger's taste and talked too rapidly. "I told you," the lieutenant said irritably, "that I'm not going to allow anyone in here." "The media has a right—" "As far as I'm concerned," Kluger said, "those bastards haven't left the mall." The television man looked around, perplexed. "They're still here, you mean?" "I know they are," Kluger said, like a religious man earnestly repeating the supreme tenet of his faith. "And I'm

not letting you people interfere with a case when it's still a hot-pursuit item." "Hot pursuit?" the man said. "Where?" At 4:10 the lab technicians and the homicide detectives called it a night. They put up barriers in front of the bank and jewelry store, closed and sealed the room in which Keski and his bodyguard had been murdered. The chief detective on the case—a sallow, quiet little man named Bretters—came over to the card table by the fountain to see how things were with Kluger. "You can't be leaving now," Kluger said. "They must be here just waiting for us to leave." "They can't be here," Bretters said softly. "But they can't have gotten out." "It's a real mystery how they slipped past you," Bretters admitted. "But we'll figure it out in a day or two." "They didn't slip past me!" "Then where are they?" "Here!" "Haven't your men looked everywhere?" Bretters asked. "Everywhere." "We'll figure it out in a couple of days," Bretters said. Then he went out after the others. At 4:20, Kluger learned that headquarters had begun to take his men away from him, dispatching them to other trouble spots all over the city. By 4:30, he was the only one left besides Hawbaker and Haggard. They went out to their patrol car to wait for him. The newspaper reporters and the radio and television people had given up at last and gone away. The owner of the jewelry store, his very nervous insurance agent, and the manager of Countryside Savings and Loan had all gone back to their homes to lie sleepless for the remainder of the night. The four corridors and the nineteen stores were deserted, silent. Lieutenant Kluger walked over to the pool and sat on the edge of the fake rocks. The fountain rose in front of him, two hundred jets of water that shot twenty feet into the air and rained back into the artificial pond. The surface of the pool was like a sheet of opaque white glass through which and in which one could see nothing at all except milky angles, whirlpools of foam, silvered bubbles. It was a restful thing to watch while he went over the night in his mind to see if he had overlooked something, anything. The two night watchmen came up to the lounge to see if there was anything he needed or wanted. "Take the chairs and table away," he said, reaching out to pluck the blueprints from the table top. As the two men folded the furniture, the big man said, "How in the hell did they do it, Lieutenant?" "Do what?" Kluger asked, looking up from the pool. "Get away." "They didn't." "What do you mean?" "They're here." The guard looked around at the mall. "I don't think so," he said, glancing pityingly at Kluger. The other watchman, the quiet one, said, "We were told not to touch anything after we were untied. Does that still go? Or can we finish closing up for the night?" The lieutenant hesitated, then sighed. "Go ahead." "Will you be leaving soon?" the first guard asked. "Soon," Kluger muttered dismally. They picked up the folded chairs and the collapsed table and carried them out of the lounge, down the east corridor to the warehouse. The carpet soaked up their footsteps. In a moment all was quiet again. How? Kluger wondered. Through the north exit? No, that had been guarded. Through the west? No. Out of the south doors or the east? No. Up onto the roof? Impossible and pointless. Out the storm drains? He got to his feet and folded up the blueprints. Still thinking about it, searching for the hole they'd used, he walked slowly across the public lounge. Behind, the fountain suddenly died. He whirled, then realized the guards had turned it off from the control panel in the warehouse. Out one of the bay doors in the east wall? Impossible. He walked slowly along the east corridor and was passing under the breached steel-bar gate when two of the three strips of fluorescent lights in the ceiling behind him fluttered out. "Good night, Lieutenant," Artie said as he came out of the warehouse behind Kluger. "Tough luck." "Yeah," Kluger said. "You'll get them sooner or later." "Yeah." In the parking lot he stood alone, the wind from the Pacific Ocean slicing past and over him. It carried the odor of salt and seaweed. In the last few hours the cloud cover had grown more dense, and the smell of rain now lay on the air, a portent. Hawbaker and Haggard were not waiting for him as he had thought they would be. Apparently they had gotten dispatched to the scene of another crime. Kluger looked at his watch. 4:43. He turned and stared at the Plaza, wondering if it could really be only three hours since he had broken into it with the acetylene torch. He saw one of the watchmen lowering

the ruined gate—and that was all he saw. Everything else was still, at peace, shrouded in the early-morning calm. Dawn would soon come. Already the sky seemed to be growing lighter, the blackness seeping away behind the clouds. He walked across the macadam to his unmarked Ford, opened the door and got in behind the wheel. The radio fizzed and sputtered at him, and the dispatcher's voice faded in and out on other channels. He started the engine and drove out of the lot, turned north on the main highway. He drove half a mile, made a wide U-turn, came back and parked on the shoulder of the road just two hundred yards from Ocean view Plaza, facing south. "Okay," he said. He thought of the smartass to whom he had talked on the telephone, thought of the ruptured bank vault and the stolen gems and the two dead men, thought of the way that Evelyn Ledderson had treated him and of the look of pity he had received from that potbellied night watchman. All of these things ran together in his mind and were inseparable, as if they were a single insult. They made a rich broth of humiliation, peppered with the realization that he had taken a setback on his march toward the chief's chair. "Okay." He took his revolver from the leather holster under his left armpit, checked to be sure it was fully loaded. "They'll have to come out on foot since we hauled the stolen station wagon out of there," Kluger said, though there was no one to hear him. He put the revolver on the seat beside him. "Okay," he repeated. "Okay, let's go. Just come right on out. Just waltz right on out of there. Come on, you bastards."

When Tucker looked up toward the surface of the pool, he could see nothing except milky angles, whirlpools of foam, and streams of silvered bubbles. It was like a sheet of opaque white glass barring sight of what lay beyond, but it was even more fragile than glass and might vanish in an instant. Throughout the more than three hours in which they had to hide from the police, Tucker's greatest fear was that someone would turn off the mall's display fountain. Without that artificial rain rising up and cascading down from two hundred jets on all sides, the surface would grow clear. Anyone could walk to the edge and look down and see three men sitting on the bottom of the pool, eight feet below. Or some-one could be attracted by the sound of three noisy bubble trails rising from three separate scuba units no longer masked by the more furious sounds of the fountain itself. If the fountain were switched off and the pool's surface permitted to resolve itself, they would be caught. However, while that was his greatest worry, it was not Tucker's only concern. He worried that their air supply— three hours which might be stretched to three hours and ten minutes by their relative inactivity—might not be sufficient to last them through the search of the mall. They might be forced to go up before the police had left; and their clever-ness and planning would not count for anything. He was also worried that some lucky cop, in searching Surf and Subsurface, would accidentally discover the empty con-tainers that had once held the scuba suits and aqualungs that he, Meyers, and Bates were now using. Meyers had said that after removing the gear, he had placed the boxes back on the shelves where he had found them, leaving no traces. He had done the same with the boxes that had contained the bright-yellow waterproof sacks in which they now stored the money, jewels, and clothing; and he had made certain that the pressurizing equipment that had charged the scuba tanks was turned off and left just as he had come across it. Never-theless . . . Tucker worried. He wondered if he should have removed the sign board that had stood beside the fountain and had carried a notice of the following week's novelty diving act. If Kluger saw the sign and took the time to read it, would he then realize that the pool, being deep enough to accommodate a diving act, was deep enough to conceal three desperate men? When the three of them had slipped into the pool with the two plastic-encased bank bags and the waterproof sacks full of clothing, had they appreciably raised the water level? Would that be noticed by anyone up there who was familiar with the mall? Had they raised the water level so far that tens of gallons had poured over the rim and onto the lounge floor? Were the rising bubbles from their aqualungs really concealed in the surface turmoil caused by the fountain? Or were they quite evident, awaiting a keen eye and quick mind to be properly interpreted? He worried. Every ten minutes he raised his wrist to his face, put the dial of his watch against the view plate of his snugly fitted diving mask, and checked the time. With as much humor as he was capable of at the moment, he thought that this would all make an excellent television commercial for the watch company, a convincing demonstration of the durability of their fine product. The slender, luminous hands crawled slowly but inexorably around the glowing green numerals, while the equally phosphorescent sweep second hand just whirled and whirled and whirled. . . . 2:30. The rubber mouthpiece that fitted past his teeth and fed air to him had a foul taste. His tongue seemed to be coated with a bitter fluid, and his saliva grew thick and rank. It was gradually making him sick to his stomach. The tanked air itself was stale, flat, unpleasant, and yet too oxygen-rich. He worked his lips around the device in his mouth, trying to make it fit more comfortably than it did, and he saw that both Frank Meyers and Edgar Bates were similarly occupied. 3:00. He had the curious sensation of being both hot and cold at the same time. Inside the tight rubber scuba suit he was slick with nervous perspiration, yet was simultaneously aware of the unrelenting cold that seeped through to him from the water. 3:30. He leaned back against the wall of the pool and tried to think about Elise and about all they had done and would do together. Staring at the shimmering green-blue water in front of him, he attempted to picture the Edo shield and spear, several other more minor treasures that he possessed . . . But he could not make himself

feel better. His eyes continually drifted to the trails of fat bubbles rising from Meyers and Bates, then followed the bubbles to the shimmering, foaming surface. . . .3:40.3:50.4:00.He worried.There was really nothing else to do.And his anxiety seemed justified when, at 4:40, the fountain was shut off. The surface of the pool stopped shimmering. The milkiness gave way to light. The film of spume fizzed and dissolved. In two minutes the surface was fully transparent. Tucker could look up and see the peaked ceiling, the fake rocks at the edge of the water ... He figured it was only a matter of seconds before uniformed police appeared on all sides, staring down at him.However, five minutes passed without incident. And then another five . . .At 4:50, with only three or four minutes of air remaining in his tank, he pushed up and, hugging the pool wall, ascended to the surface as slowly and cautiously as he could manage in this unfamiliar element. Sheltered against the low fake rocks, he lifted his head until he could look down the east corridor. He would not have been surprised if he had collected a bullet in the face, but nothing like that happened. The hall was deserted, and most of the ceiling lights had been turned off. The same was true of the other three corridors. The silence was almost unnatural, gravelike. He waited, watching the recessed store entrances for movement, but he saw nothing. Evidently the police had packed up and gone home not long ago—probably just before the fountain had been shut off.He sank back down to the bottom and gave Bates and Meyers the thumbs-up sign. With a minimum of thrashing about, mindful of the continuing need for silence, they rose until their heads were out of the water.Tucker pulled away his mouthpiece and lifted his mask to his forehead. "They're gone," he whispered. "But the watch-men will still be here."Without removing their masks or mouthpieces, Meyers and Bates nodded to let him know they understood. Bates wiped beads of water from his pale cheeks."We've got to be absolutely quiet," Tucker whispered. "We aren't out of this yet."They nodded again.He worked his mask down over his eyes, made sure that the seal was firm all the way around the faceplate, then slipped the rubber air feed into his mouth and clamped it tightly between his teeth once more. The foul taste filled his mouth again, but he tried to ignore it. He went to the bottom with Bates and Meyers to gather up their clothes, the Skorpions, and the loot.Ten minutes later they had left the pool and had carried all of their belongings to the shadows in the recessed entrance to Shen Yang's Orient. They had shed their cumbersome aqualungs and masks but not their wetsuits, which were rapidly dripping dry."The guns," Meyers whispered.Tucker knelt and opened a yellow waterproof bag in which, they had stashed the Skorpions, and he passed the pistols around. They were bone dry.They dressed, pulling their clothes on over the black rubber scuba gear. Without anyone having to say as much, each of them knew that there was not nearly enough time for them to strip out of these clinging suits."Now what?" Meyers asked when he was dressed.Tucker finished tying his shoes and stood up. "We wait." "For the watchmen?"Tucker nodded: Yes."How long?" Meyers whispered."Until they come."Meyers raised one eyebrow. "You think they'll make their regular rounds tonight?"Tucker nodded."After what's happened?" "Especially after what's happened," Tucker whispered."If they don't?" "We'll worry about that later."Meyers remained in the shadows in front of Shen Yang's, out of sight of anyone who might walk up the east corridor from the mall's warehouse. Planting his feet wide apart to give himself good balance, he gripped his Skorpion in both hands, held it across his broad chest, and settled down for a long wait.Stepping across the lounge to stand in the darkened entranceway to Young Maiden on the other flank of the east corridor, Tucker and Bates also took up the vigil.At 5:30, Chet and Artie came out of the warehouse and started up the corridor toward the lounge. They were arguing about the way the police had handled things, and from the spirited way they were going at each other it was obvious that they did not expect any more trouble.Meyers raised one hand.Tucker nodded affirmatively.When the two watchmen reached the lounge and stepped out of the hall, Meyers moved in on their right and Bates covered them on the left, pinning them between the two Skorpions."If you go for your guns," Tucker said, "you're both dead. You

played it cool and smart the first time. Don't be foolish now."The quiet one, Artie, groaned. "Hey . . . Hey, I feel like I'm having the same nightmare over and over."Chet was too enraged to speak. He spluttered at them and nearly choked on his anger, half raised one fist in a useless threat that impressed no one.Tucker walked around behind them to pick the revolvers out of their holsters. "Be cool now." "Little bastard," Chet said, finally regaining his voice.Tucker was reaching for Artie's gun when he heard a strange guttural sound behind him. Odd as it was, he knew immediately the source of it. That damned police dog was loose.

The German shepherd, which had been trained to follow well behind the night watchmen, had come out of the open warehouse door and was running for all its great strength, rapidly closing the distance between them. Its ears were pinned flat against its skull, and its long tail curved between its hind legs. The carpet gave the brute excellent purchase and considerably softened the sound of its thumping paws. Tucker turned completely around to face it and automatically swung up the Skorpion. But he hesitated, remembering what a friend in the business had once told him about guard dogs. . . . Two years before Tucker had hooked up with three other men to knock over a major department store for its cash receipts on the last shopping day before Christmas. In the middle of that robbery one of the other men, an all-around professional named Osborne, had been attacked by a trained mutt. Using only his bare hands, he had quickly and efficiently killed it without sustaining a single tooth or claw mark. It was necessary, after that job, for them to hole up at an abandoned farmhouse for several days, and during that time Osborne explained to Tucker how to handle any dog. Osborne had learned his stuff in the army, where he had also learned to kill men, and he had not minded passing it along to Tucker. The dog was less than two hundred feet away. Most certainly this dog was not a killer. After all, it was trained to follow the guards and to be available in emergencies. Like this one. Nevertheless, Tucker had to deal with it as if it were a killer. It would worry him until it was either dead or badly hurt, and it might sow enough confusion to let Chet and Artie get control of the situation. Men had educated it in violence, had corrupted it, and now it was going to have to pay for its unwanted and unsought knowledge. "Look out!" Edgar shouted. Even as the juggler involuntarily cried out, Meyers said, "For Christ's sake, shoot!" Neither he nor Bates was in a position to use his Skorpion without killing the watchmen and Tucker, too. "Shoot!" According to Len Osborne, any gun you could name was useless against a well-trained guard dog. For one thing, a dog was too small a target, especially when it was coming at you head-on. Even a big shepherd was too damned narrow to get a sight on. Furthermore, it was too compact, vicious, and fast. Even a superior marksman would not have time to aim properly and squeeze off a shot before the dog was at his arm or throat. Shooting from the hip, figuratively speaking, without benefit of aiming, provided little accuracy. You might as well throw sticks, Osborne had said. Tucker dropped the Skorpion and heard Bates cry out. I hope this wetsuit doesn't slow me up, Tucker thought. If it did, he was dead, or at least badly mauled. And even if the dog held him without hurting him, he was certain to spend a long time in jail. There was only one moment, Osborne had said, when a dog was vulnerable: when it was in the air, after it had jumped, in the final seconds before it struck. Until that moment, it was totally mobile and could attack or evade or change its mind in an instant. But once it was committed, when it was in the air, launched at its victim, it was relatively defenseless. Its teeth were not yet within striking range, and its claws were harmless while it was in flight. Its front paws were tucked weakly back and would not spring forward and unsheath their claws until the bare instant before contact. If you moved quickly and surely enough . . . If you leaped forward to intercept instead of backing away from it, you could grab one of those front paws, twist it as you would a man's arm, let yourself fall to the ground, and throw the beast over your head just as hard as you could manage. Its own momentum would ensure that it would fall fairly far off and that it would hit the ground with considerable impact. At the very least, it would be badly stunned, too confused to attack again immediately. More likely than not, one of its legs would break. A cripple was no threat. And if you tossed it right, the neck would snap or the spine would splinter like a stick of dry wood. These things flicked through Tucker's mind, each part of the lesson like a silhouette against the strong light of fear. Then there was no time to recall any more of Osborne's advice because the shepherd jumped at him. Against all instinct, Tucker stepped into it, grabbed desperately for one of the animal's forelegs, closed his hand around the bone and muscle and fur, twisted, fell, and threw.

He saw a fierce, wall-eyed face, bared fangs . . . He was certain his timing could not be right, though his body evidenced a natural timing in the maneuver. There were shouts behind him. Also behind him, something crashed heavily to the floor. Rolling against the corridor wall, pushing away from it with both hands, Tucker scrambled to his feet. He was breathing hard, and his shoulders hurt like hell; but so far he did not think that he was bleeding. Not much, anyway. He looked toward the others and saw that they had made room for the shepherd, which was struggling to stand on its shattered foreleg. It snapped at the air and glared with bloodshot eyes at Tucker. Then it made a strange, pathetic mewling sound and rolled over on its side and died. Though to a lesser extent than he had when he discovered Meyers' victims in the mall office, Tucker felt sick to his stomach. For a long moment, stunned by the sudden violence, no one spoke. They stared at the dead shepherd, watching the blood spread out around it. Though they had all witnessed its demise, the entire episode seemed unreal. "Whew!" Meyers said finally. Tucker wiped his face, came away with a hand sheathed in sweat. "Whew!" he agreed. Edgar Bates said, "Where on earth did you learn to do a thing like that?" They all stared at him, even the two watchmen, interested in his answer. "Milwaukee," Tucker said. "Milwaukee?" Bates asked. "Spent Christmas Day with an ex-commando officer." "But you never did it before?" "Only in my mind, theoretically," Tucker said. He bent over and picked up the Skorpion, which he had thrown aside when he recalled Osborne's advice. "Let's tie up Chet and Artie here so we can get out of this damned place." "I'm for that," Meyers said. As Tucker relieved the watchmen of their guns, Chet said, "You won't get away with this." Tucker burst out laughing.

Frank Meyers could not see why they had to go out of the mall through the storm drain. With the claustrophobe's classic expression of fear, his face deeply lined with apprehension and downright terror, he gazed into the black hole in the warehouse floor and shook his head. "It doesn't make sense to me. Why don't we just walk out the door, like we came in?" "It's ten minutes after six in the morning," Tucker explained patiently. "It's almost broad daylight. If the cops left a squad car behind to cover the Plaza, they'll spot us the minute we step outside." "It's a chance we shouldn't take," Edgar Bates said. Even now, despite all that had gone wrong with other aspects of the job, he was floating along on the memory of his successes. Meyers frowned, as if he felt they were ganging up on him without reason. "You think the cops would stake this place out after they searched it and came up empty handed?" "Yes," Tucker said. "Why?" Meyers asked. "Why would they?" "Kluger's the type to cover all bets," Tucker said. "I wouldn't even be surprised if he was out there himself." "Well," Meyers said, scratching his chin and thinking it over, "you haven't been wrong about anything you've done." "That's right." He stopped scratching his chin. "So . . . I guess I'll go down the drain with you." "You don't have to phrase it quite as pessimistically as that," Tucker said, smiling. "We're home free," Bates said. Tucker said, "Not yet." Meyers sighed, rubbed the back of his neck. "You think this Kluger might have put a man on the end of this drain pipe, even after the mall search failed?" "If I thought that," Tucker said, "we wouldn't be going out this way." "Well, then, aren't we home free, like Edgar said?" "I just don't like to hear a lot of talk about how we're out of it—until we really are out of it." He fished in his jacket pocket and found a roll of Life Savers. "Lime," he told them. "Anybody want one?" Neither Bates nor Meyers wanted one. Tucker popped the circlet into his mouth, put the roll into his pocket, then sat down on the edge of the drain and jumped down into the pipe. He turned and reached up to Bates who handed down the two large waterproof sacks that contained the bank bags full of money and uncut stones. The juggler followed, then Meyers. They had two flashlights, which drove back the darkness and the centipedes, and they reached the end of the tunnel in only three or four minutes. Meyers greeted the first sight of the exit with a loud sigh of relief. Sunlight slanting in behind them flooded the erosion gully and made the scrub land look washed out and dead. It stung their eyes and robbed them of the cover of night for the remainder of their escape route. But it plainly showed that there were no police hidden behind any of the boulders. Weary, stiff, and sore, the three of them climbed out of the drain and down the gully wall, dragging the two big sacks with them. Tucker called a halt at the boulders behind which the three cops had taken refuge last night, and he said, "We'll bury the Skorpions here." Meyers glanced quickly at the brush and the scattered palms, looked back in the direction of Oceanview Plaza, which was hidden from them by the rising land. "What if we need them?" "We won't," Tucker said. They scooped up the soft earth and laid the pistols in the depression they had made, then shoved the loose dirt over them. "What if they find them?" Meyers asked. He seemed ready to exhume his own gun. "So what if they do?" Tucker asked. "They'll trace them." "No." "You sure?" "Come on," Tucker said wearily. "Let's move ass." They continued along the gully, considerably slowed and burdened by the two sacks of money and gems but not in the least displeased to have to bear them. The six- and seven-foot banks on both sides kept them from being seen by anyone to the north or the south, while only empty land lay behind them. And the closer they got to the highway, the more they were hidden from the cars rushing up and down the coast, for the erosion channel dropped even deeper and fed into another man-sized drainage tunnel under the roadbed. They dragged the sacks through the drain and came out on the far side of the highway, on the last of the gentle hills above the beach. The air was pleasantly tangy with elemental odors. Sea gulls soared in from the whitecaps, crying shrilly and dancing on the air currents. "The ocean's beautiful this morning," Edgar Bates said as he followed the other two out of the drain. Although he ached in every muscle and joint, and although his eyes felt grainy and his mouth tasted of rubber,

Tucker looked out at the rolling sea and the endless sky, and he had to agree. "It sure is," he said. They crabbed down the slopes to the beach and turned south through the soft yellow-white sand. In less than five minutes they came to a paved beach-access road. Above them now, overhanging the beach, were expensive glass, chrome, and redwood houses that glinted in the early-morning sun-light. "We'll need a car," Tucker said. He turned to Meyers. "Think you can find one up there?" "Sure." "Take your time." "Five minutes." "Take your time," Tucker repeated. "We don't want to blow it all now, not after what we've been through." Tucker sat down on the money sacks. He put his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands, and he watched Meyers walk away up the curving access lane and out of sight around a hillock of sand and yellow beach grass. Edgar put down his satchel and went out to the edge of the sea to splash water on his face. He was whistling again. Twenty minutes later, at 6:45, Frank Meyers drove down to them in a new Jaguar 2+2, a sleek black machine that purred much more softly than did its namesake. They put the sacks in the trunk. Edgar climbed into the back seat with his bag of tools, and Tucker sat in the front passenger's bucket next to Meyers. "How do you like this baby?" Meyers asked, grinning and patting the wooden steering wheel. "Did you have to take the flashiest thing you could find?" Tucker asked. "We don't want to turn heads, you know. We just want to slip back into the city like three ordinary guys on their way to work." "I like it," Bates said from the back seat. "There were maybe half a dozen others I could have gotten," Meyers said, "but they weren't so convenient. There was a lot less risk for me with this baby. The engine was cold, but the keys were in the ignition." He laughed. "Didn't have to jump wires. This guy must have had a late night, come home stoned, and won't be up for hours yet. Look, we'll just be like three stinking rich ordinary guys on their way to work." "And in a way," Edgar Bates said, "that's what we are." Tucker smiled, relaxed, leaned back in the genuine leather upholstery. "Except that we're not going to work—we're coming home from it." He pulled his seat belt across and buckled it. "Let's get out of here." Sitting in his squad car across the highway from Ocean-view Plaza, Lieutenant Norman Kluger watched the sun come up. Inexorably, as the night gave way to warm morning light, Kluger's self-confidence gave way to anger, irritation, confusion, and finally despair. No one had come out of the mall. Had anyone been in there to begin with? He wished he could wind the sun back down across the sky, turn it half way around the world, and tackle this case again, from the beginning. Well after sunrise, when the traffic began to pick up, he reluctantly decided to call it quits. He buckled his seat belt, started the engine, and drove away from there. All the way back to the station, he functioned under a veil of emotional narcosis. He delivered the car to the division garage man and went inside the low stucco building to fill out his duty roster. His eyes felt grainy, his mouth dry and stale. All he wanted now was to get home and fall into bed. At the dispatchers' table, there was considerable excitement. He ignored that and went to his own desk in the large main room, where he filled out a skeleton report and filed it. His first failure . . . As he was leaving, one of the off-duty officers who was in the crowd around the dispatchers stopped him. "Hey, weren't you on that Oceanview robbery last night?" Kluger winced. "Yeah." He yawned. "What do you think of this?" "Of what?" Kluger was suddenly alert. "The day shift of Oceanview's security guard came on this morning, just a couple of minutes ago. They found the watchmen tied up again. Looks like the place was robbed twice last night." Kluger just stood there. He was looking at the other man, but he was seeing the police chief's chair in which he would never sit by the time he was forty years old. They parked six blocks from the hotel in downtown Los Angeles, and Bates went to get his rented car to ferry them the last half mile. At the hotel they went to their rooms, showered and shaved, dressed in clean clothes, and checked out at half-hour intervals. Then Bates drove them out to Van Nuys where they took two rooms at the Carriage Inn, a motel where they could have complete privacy. Exhausted, they slept all afternoon. At seven o'clock that evening Meyers and Bates came to Tucker's room with a banquet of take-out

orders from Saul's, a first-class Jewish restaurant-delicatessen on Ventura. They ate, drank cold bottles of Coors, and talked about everything but the job they had worked on only that morning. When they had finished supper and cleaned up the debris, Tucker opened the two waterproof yellow sacks and then the bank bags, and they separated the cash from the jewels. For an hour they counted money, then cross-checked one another's figures. The total take from Countryside Savings and Loan Company was \$212,210, no change. After Tucker peeled off a thousand to cover the expense of the Skorpions, they each had \$70,400. It looked very nice. "What'll we do with the extra ten?" Meyers asked, pointing at the last bill left alone on the center of the bedspread. "Leave it for the room maid," Tucker said, placing it in the center of the blotter on the desk. "Now what about the jewels?" Edgar asked, lifting two handfuls of them and letting them trickle out between his fingers. "You're the one who knows the fence. You going to take these back to New York?" "They'd make for a damned heavy suitcase," Tucker said. "Besides, certain models of airport metal detectors will pick up on diamonds." "What, then?" "In the morning," Tucker said, "I'll get three or four one-pound cans of pipe tobacco. I'll empty the tobacco out, fill the tins with the stones, pack the tins in a box, and mail it all to myself." Meyers frowned. "Is that safe?" "I might insure it," Tucker said, "for a thousand bucks." They looked at him, open-mouthed, then caught on and laughed. "If the post office loses them," Meyers said, "I'll expect my three hundred and thirty-three dollars." They drank a few more bottles of Coors, talked about other people in the business, and broke up shortly past midnight. At the door of Tucker's room Meyers said, "You leaving first thing tomorrow?" "I've got reservations for the two o'clock flight," Tucker said. "I'll probably stay over a few days. Just through the weekend. I'll be at the same apartment when I come back to New York. At least I will be for a few weeks. When you get yours from the fence, you know where to reach me." "Okay," Tucker said. "It's been a pleasure." Tucker nodded. "Maybe we'll do it again soon." "Maybe," Tucker said, though he knew that he would never get involved in another job with Frank Meyers.

Early Friday evening, Tucker walked into his Park Avenue apartment, closed the door, and called for Elise. When he found that she was not home, he opened the front closet, stepped inside, and worked the combination dial of the wall safe. His Tucker wallet full of Tucker papers went into the safe, and his real wallet full of his real papers came out. He unlatched the smallest of the two suitcases, the one he had bought in Los Angeles, and he transferred the seventy thousand dollars to the small vault. In the kitchen he found the accumulated mail from the last four days laid out for him on the table, and he looked through it. There were several bills, advertisements, a book-club selection, magazines, nothing really important. He made himself a cold roast beef sandwich with a slice of cheese, mixed a drink, and went out into the main hall. He stood in front of the Edo shield and spear, eating and drinking as his eyes roved over the familiar lines of the artifacts. When Elise had not shown up by nine-thirty, he knew that she was either working on a night filming assignment or was out to dinner and a show with friends. She would probably not get back until midnight or after. In the den he picked up Smith and Wan-go's *China: A History in Art*, but his mind kept wandering, and his eyes would not focus on the printed words. He put the book aside and switched on the television set. Watching the screen without actually paying attention to the images moving upon it, he began to think about those two bloody bodies in the mall's business office. He shuddered uncontrollably and felt nauseous. He always tried to set up a job in such a way that no killing was required. He was not quick to point a gun, and he rarely used one. In the past he had found himself incapable of extreme violence except when it was absolutely necessary to save his own life. That had happened only twice. The first time, he had been forced into a corner by a crooked and brutal cop who wanted to cut himself in on a piece of the action—Tucker's piece; and once there had been a partner who had decided to kill Tucker and avoid the unpleasant ritual of splitting the take from a robbery. Both times, Tucker had taken the only option that they had left open to him: he had killed. But the night-mares had haunted him for months afterward, and the guilt was still with him. Although he had not had a hand in the deaths of Keski and the bodyguard at Oceanview Plaza, he knew he would always feel some responsibility for them. There would be new nightmares. Suddenly the color picture on the television screen came through to him for the first time—and there was Elise spraying perfume on her slender wrists and pretty neck. As the male voice-over sold the product, Elise smiled at the camera, smiled at Tucker . . . She seemed perfectly real, not an image on a strip of film but a flesh-and-blood woman. Tucker wanted to reach out and touch her. When he had been sitting at the bottom of the pool in Oceanview Plaza, he had been worried about losing her, and he was plagued by the same anxiety now. He needed her more than he had ever previously admitted to himself. She had nursed him through those nightmares and through so much more. When every-one else was considered, she was his only friend. The commercial ended. Elise vanished. Before his thoughts could slip back to the dead men in his past, he went out and mixed himself another drink. He stood by the spear and shield in the main hall. There, he could turn and look at Elise the moment she came through the front door, which could not be too soon.

Brian Coffey is the pen name of a young American writer whose fiction has sold over two million copies throughout the world. Surrounded is the second (the first was Blood Risk) in a series featuring Mike Tucker, a man with two identities and a Robin Hood attitude to crime. Arthur Barker Limited